

I survived the dressing and undressing hurdles. I did reasonably well with all the swimming strokes we had to learn to get our merit badge. I even made it through the test where I had to jump into the pool fully clothed, with heavy shoes, and tread water for 10 minutes to prove that I could save myself from drowning if I ever fell into the water fully clothed with heavy shoes on.

I also discovered that there were two things I could do in the water better than anyone else. First of all, in moderately shallow water, I could do a handstand, hold it longer than anyone, and point my toes and legs in various lovely ballet positions – all this upside down with my head underwater.

Secondly, I could float – I mean I could really float. I could push off the bottom with my toes, lay back on the water, put my arms out, and my feet would just come right up and my toes stick out of the water – and I could lie there floating longer than anyone else. Maybe it's because my zodiac sign is Cancer – we are the water people. Or maybe it's a compensation we short folks have or maybe it's a truly innate unique quality all my own.

Now floating is a highly under-rated skill. In junior high school, whenever I didn't want to hear what my parents were trying to say to me while I was in the pool, I'd just lie back and float – and then I couldn't hear them, I didn't run out of breath, and they couldn't reach me. A few years later, when I had an attentive boyfriend, I could lie back and float, and he could put his hands on my feet and push me all around the pool as if I were a raft. Somehow, this seemed really cool to me at the time. I liked it much better than playing Marco Polo.

Many years later, I still love to float. I believe that it is not only wonderful to do in the water, but it is also a spiritual metaphor and a spiritual experience as well. I lie back and the vertical world disappears. It becomes amazingly quiet and I don't have to do a thing. In fact, when you are floating, if you get distracted by worrying about something or if you try too hard, you sink. I can lie there and watch the sky and the clouds and the birds and have that amazing bodily sensation of trust, of knowing that the water is holding me, and I can just be.

Floating is a good metaphor for me about what I need, physically, emotionally and spiritually, to renew my body, my compassion, and my soul. I'm looking forward to some time to float this summer, not only in the water, but also floating through time during some of my vacation days. I'm looking forward to some days where I can just be with the rhythm of the day, waking up without an alarm going off, without an agenda, watching the clouds at sunset, not rushing anywhere to do anything or accomplishing anything or having to make anything better. And I wish some days like that for you as well this summer.

I believe that floating is a metaphor with a lot to teach me about life, about second-chances and about faith. When I was at the United Church of Christ General Synod in Tampa last week-end, we had the joy of experiencing "Nuttin' But Strings," a musical duo of two brothers of color, Damien and Tourie Escobar, who play the classical violin. They grew up in Jamaica Queens New York, had one violin in the house that they played on, and then got the opportunity to attend Juilliard School of Music. In

their late teens, after playing every day in the subways of New York, they appeared on the Jay Leno show which led to some success.

Damien and Tourie shared with us that they never had been taught what to do with money, so they spend it all and then learned about something called the Internal Revenue Service and lost everything. Back on the streets, playing again in the subways, they got another break, coming in second on "America's Got Talent". One thing led to another and they are now in charge of their own career, wiser about everything, and are fantastic musicians and performers. They recounted their mother's best advice to them: "Life is hard. You may not always be able to swim; just don't sink. Remember that it is OK to float sometimes."

There are times in our lives when we face a crisis that we cannot do anything about, that we cannot solve in our usual problem-solving mode, and the ability to float is one spiritual practice that can help us through those dark times. Let me share Dawna Markova's story about such a time. She says, "When I was in the hospital, the one person whose presence I welcomed was a woman who came to sweep the floors with a large push broom. Of the 50 or so people who made contact with me in any given day, she was the only one who wasn't trying to fix me or change me. One night, she reached out and put her hand on the top of my shoulder. On her next visit, she looked at me, with no evaluation, no trying to figure out what was wrong with me. She just looked and saw me. Then she said simply, 'You are more than the sickness in your body. You are more than the fear in your body. Float on it. Float above it. You are more than your pain.' And," Markova says, "then I remembered floating when I was young, in Lake George, in the Atlantic Ocean off Coney Island, in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa. This Jamaican woman had led me to a source of comfort that was wider and deeper than pain or fear. She touched my soul with her compassionate presence and her fingerprints are still there."

When I read Markova's story, I also think of the near-death experiences I have heard, experiences that include an initial floating above oneself and looking down at one's body. Kathleen Singh writes in her book The Grace in Dying that many people, as they die, appear to melt, to float into Spirit, in serenity and peace, simply dissolving out of their bodies. When I think about my own death, I am not afraid of what will happen to me when I am dead. While I can't give a name or a picture to where my spirit will go, I believe it is a state of harmony and spiritual beauty. What I fear most in death is the letting go: of my life, of my loved ones, of all I treasure on this earth.

So spiritually, prayerfully, the practice of floating - of letting go, of resting my body and myself and my time in trust, held up by grace - is, for me, a crucial path on my faith journey. That practice of floating, the experience of letting go in trust, can renew my tired self, that can ease my passage in crisis, and that can, I believe, sustain me in those final steps of my earthly journey.

I take refuge in the words of the Psalmist who speaks in our morning's scripture passage about God who lifts us from our confusion, guides us so that the power of love overcomes our fears, and protects us so that we are, when we awakened, surrounded in the light of grace.

And Denise Levertov conveys that sense of floating in trust and faith in her poem, which is for me a mantra, not only about summer vacation days, but also letting go of fear and letting in grace in the hardest times and the most unknown passages in life:

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing that no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

PRAYER - In silence, bring your attention and your focus to this moment. Breathe in and out, deeply and slowly, inhaling calm, exhaling any stress. As you breathe, relax your neck and shoulders, relax your arms and hands, relax your chest and stomach, relax your legs and feet, relax your mind. Let go of tension; let go of thoughts.

Imagine yourself floating – easily, effortlessly – on water, on air, on a magic carpet, on a raft, on a boat, on a star – whatever image works for you. Your feet are up, your arms are out, your face is open to the sky.

You are floating – you are supported and held and sustained by the Divine.

There is light all around you – Holy Light – the Light and Love of the Creator – within you and around you. Breathe in and out – deeply and slowly, knowing that Light and Love flow through you – as you float. Soak in this moment – soak in the light – soak in the love – let it flow through you.

Imagine now, from this place of floating, slowly and gently, letting your feet down, letting them touch firm clear sand or firm resilient carpet, and as you imagine slowly standing up, your arms stretch out and your hands open. From this position of openness, send light and love to several people who you name in your heart.

O Spirit of Creation, named and unnamable, your creative loving power surrounds us every moment. May we open our arms, our hearts, and our breath to your sustaining presence, in the air we breathe and in the beauty we see and taste and smell and hear and touch. And may we float in trust in your deep embrace. Blessed be.