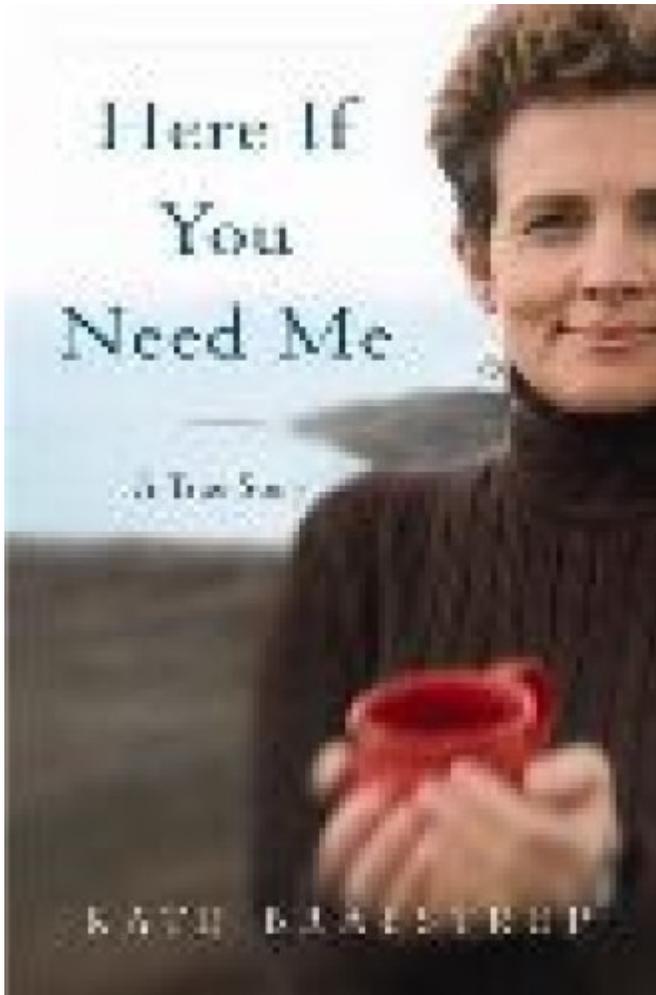


Finding the body

By [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Here If You Need Me: A True Story

Kate Braestrup
Little, Brown

Kate Braestrup's memoir is all about bodies: living and dead, lost and found. A chaplain for the Maine Warden Service, Braestrup writes about search-and-rescue

missions to find hikers and hunters lost in the forests, mountains and bogs of the state. At the sad conclusion of many of these forays, she must kneel beside a dead body, pray over it and help to load it into a body bag, then comfort the loved ones who remain.

As a widow too, Braestrup writes about bodies: her husband's, dead in a car accident, and her own and her four children's as they react to the sudden loss. Against the advice of many, Braestrup insisted on bathing and dressing her husband's corpse. When the baffled funeral director inquired into her plans for disposing of the remains, she writes in characteristically simple but gorgeous prose, her first thought was: *"I am his remains."*

Considering that bodies fill the landscape of this memoir, it is unfortunate that Braestrup's original title—"Finding the Body: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Law Enforcement in the Maine Woods"—got lost en route to publication. "Too grim" was the assessment of the publisher's marketing team. What the marketers either missed or didn't trust readers to notice is that the title "Finding the Body" evokes not only the grotesque but also the sacred. They overlooked the fact that Braestrup's candid treatment of bodies ends not in the macabre details of dead remains but in reverent care for living ones.

Fortunately, the final title is the only lackluster thing about the book. Once readers crack the spine and start reading, they will find a startling mix of humor, empathy, faith and lyric beauty. This is no saccharine story of healing, no memoir of "how I bounced back after my husband's death," even though Braestrup acknowledges that her narrative had the potential to be just that. Instead, it is a compelling literary and spiritual investigation into a life lived adjacent to death, and into what such propinquity might require of us.

Framing the book is the death of Braestrup's husband, Drew, a Maine state trooper who had begun planning for a second career as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Within a year of Drew's death, Braestrup herself entered seminary with a desire to serve as a law enforcement chaplain. "Mine is a sweet little story, one that has what my journalist father used to call a 'great hook,'" Braestrup writes: "The Tale of the Plucky Widow."

She admits that her new vocation as a chaplain is a "hand-me-down calling" of sorts; "I do not dismiss the notion that I might have been trying to keep Drew with me by

doing his work,” she writes. But she also articulates a strong, if also mystery-laden, faith in God’s role in people’s lives and a sense of awe and privilege at working in what she calls a “ministry of presence.” “It’s so cool that the warden service has a chaplain to keep us from freaking out,” says one woman whose daughter was lost (and later found) in the woods. “I’m not really here to keep you from freaking out,” replies Braestrup. “I’m here to be with you while you freak out.”

Braestrup’s ministry of presence extends to the game wardens themselves, whom she often accompanies as they patrol Maine’s wilderness. The wardens emerge as the heroes of her story—humble, hardworking, compassionate outdoorspeople who make a living searching for, rescuing and protecting the bodies of others. Some of the wardens consider themselves religious; many do not. Braestrup recounts conversations about God and life and death held in pickups, at truck stops and beside corpses found face down in autumn leaves. She serves the wardens mostly by sitting with them, listening and affirming the questions that emerge from the crisis-ridden nature of their work.

The wardens come to signify more than heroism. After recounting the story of a child’s drowning and the agony of the warden who recovered her body from a frozen lake, Braestrup presents the warden as a theological key to the questions that arise from labors surrounding life and death. “Here is my answer to the theodicy problem in a nutshell,” she writes. “Frank took the child out from under the ice with his own hands, tried to give her breath, and his heart broke when he could not save her life. Frank is the answer.”

Braestrup’s expansive understandings of God and suffering and love will irk some readers. She admits that she resembles Father Mulcahy on TV’s *M*A*S*H*: “a generic, ecumenical clergyperson representing the God that even atheists pray to in foxholes, an undemanding character.” Yet if her broad faith commitments can occasionally give her prose a pop-song flavor (“If you are living in love, you are in heaven no matter where you are”), on the whole her unconventional religiosity gives it a fresh and authentic timbre. Her irreligious upbringing and inclusive faith also allow her astounding entrées into the lives of people who would be suspicious of a more traditional chaplain. “We’re not churchgoers,” the father of a missing child tells her bluntly. “I’m not a church minister,” Braestrup responds, with a shrug and a smile.

Memoirs of secular people who have turned religious have been showing up a lot recently. A. J. Jacobs's *The Year of Living Biblically* (previously excerpted in these pages), an account of a Jewish agnostic's attempt to follow biblical commands for a year, is accompanied by his wife's droll commentary and his friends' concern that he'll "go native." Sara Miles, a thoroughly secular journalist with no interest in becoming "a religious nut," writes of her family and friends' wariness about her conversion in *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*.

Braestrup joins these memoirists in recounting the skepticism of friends and family about her vocation: "Dear Kate, you don't really believe in God, do you?" her brother asks her in an e-mail when she decides to go to seminary. Like Anne Lamott and Kathleen Norris, who discovered or returned to faith as adults, Braestrup and these other recent memoirists accomplish what people with impressive ecclesial pedigrees are rarely able to do: narrate a faith marked in equal parts by ambiguity and conviction, responsive to Enlightenment skepticism but also faithful to their own experiences of the sacred.

In the end, Braestrup finds God mostly in the acts of people caring for each other in crisis. Though this is not a particularly new discovery, Braestrup relates it in gripping and exquisite prose. She does so through constant reference to bodies—not in a trendy, postmodern manner, but with consistent, loving attention to the ways that bodies fall and catch each other in grief. "It doesn't matter how educated, moneyed, or smart you are," Braestrup writes back to her brother,

When your child's footprints end at the river's edge, when the one you love has gone into the woods with a bleak outlook and a loaded gun, when the chaplain is walking toward you with bad news in her mouth, then only the clichés are true, and you will repeat them unashamed. . . . If you are really wise—and it's surprising and wondrous, Brother, how many people have this wisdom in them—you will know enough to look around for love. It will be there . . . holding out its arms to you. If you are wise, whoever you are, you will let go, fall against that love, and be held.