

Drowned by God

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I was swimming along just fine, regularly going for a mile or more, several times a week. I felt strong and sleeker than usual. Then, one day, I just didn't feel like it and had to argue myself into going to the pool. I felt bloated and stressed and harried, and in my convincing conversation with myself, I reminded me that this is exactly the kind of time when it's important to go ahead and get moving instead of eating half a cake in front of the TV. It's probably a result of watching too much TV and too many movies, but on the first lap I kept waiting to start feeling better. *I'm moving now. I complied. Kick in the soaring inspirational montage music and I'll feel sleekness return. I'll be out of the funk.*

That's not what happened. I don't remember how long I swam that day—maybe a half mile, if I made it that far—and every single stroke was a struggle. There was no montage music. There was no lightening of my load. I never hit my swimming stride to feel sleek and smooth, gliding through the water. I felt like I was thrashing around, slapping and splashing, struggling to breathe.

I was praying the whole time. Praying as I convinced myself to go. Praying as I got into the pool and started thrashing. Praying for my stroke to even out. Praying for God to be with me and lift some of the burden I felt, weighing me down. I thought I was struggling with myself—with self-doubt and that strangely stultifying combination of physical laziness and overwork—but as I doggedly kept slapping the surface of the water, gasping for each breath, I started to think maybe it wasn't me.

I started to wonder if I was in a wrestling match with God. And, since I was in the pool, I also wondered if God was trying to drown me. That feeling didn't go away for the entire swim, and I wondered why God would want to wrestle me right then, on a shaky day to begin with, in a particularly vulnerable location.

I love the story of Jacob wrestling all night with the angel/God (Genesis 32: 22–32), refusing to let go or give in until he'd received the blessing he was after. I love the idea of God as one who's willing to get this intimate with us in our struggles, but

until my own wrestling match I always thought of the wrestling itself as merely a metaphor. I preferred my actual experiences of God to be in more in the comforting metaphor variety—Good Shepherd, mother hen (John 10: 11-18, Matthew 23:37).

That day in the pool, I was face-to-face, breath-to-struggling-breath, with a very present but not so comforting God. I don't know why and I am not sure I know yet what blessing I wrangled that day, but God was definitely present in the pool with me and it wasn't the comfort I thought it would be when I started swimming and praying.

Months later, when I'd pushed that episode to the back of my mind, it came pouring back to the front during a conversation with my students. We'd been singing the John Mark McMillan song "How He Loves," which includes this line, "If grace is an ocean we're all sinking." I told them this doesn't seem like grace for me, that I like the metaphor of grace as an ocean but it needs language like "floating" and "buoyed up" to describe it. Do we really want grace to *sink* us? Isn't that like being *drowned* by grace?

Then I remembered my wrestling match. Maybe McMillan's got it right after all. Maybe we *do* want grace to sink us. From our watery beginnings in baptism, death for Christians is as present as life. When we join the tribe, we enter through a "watery grave," believing it holds the promise of life. And it does, but we go by the road Christ himself traveled, as Charles Wesley wrote (*United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 302): "Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia! / Following our exalted head, Alleluia! / Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia! / Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!"

I don't know why I thought God would stand back in my vulnerable moment instead of jumping in with me. I don't know why I thought metaphors were enough. Don't get me wrong: I don't want a rematch, at least not in the pool. But maybe part of the blessing I received that day was the experience itself, of being taken hold of by God in a desperate and vulnerable moment, and being held onto no matter how I struggled and resisted, no matter how much I begged for a mother hen instead of an underwater sumo wrestler.

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