

Returning

THE PATTERN OF THE HOURS I spend at our cabin in New Hampshire is this. Sun sets over Red Hill just after 9:00 P.M. in the summer. Within a half hour the bats begin to swoop. If they come close enough the rapid flap of their wings is a vibration to the ear. By 10:00 P.M., if you pay attention, you will see the occasional firefly in the wild blueberry.

One common loon calls each night just after 10:00 P.M., off the southern end of Emerson Island. If I am laughing hard in those moments when it calls goodnight, or maybe singing with my family, or if I've gone inside the cabin to grab a strike-anywhere match to get the campfire started, I miss the nightly loon call altogether.

The peepers commence—those insistent, hidden tree frogs—retelling the only story they know to tell. And also the bullfrogs that line the pond edge and gulp a drunken call from their chubby throats, like the low note plunks of my father's banjo. They won't shut up until after 2:00 A.M.

Then, right when I am about to fall asleep under layers of old quilts and flannel sheets there are sounds of an animal just outside my window. I used to be certain these frequent sounds—crack of branch, pinecone snap, foot and claws on stone wall—were sounds of bear. And I would wake, instantly. Ready to be torn apart.

I have now slept in our cabin on my parents' land for many nights of many years and I have learned to distinguish the lesser mammal (the weasels and coons whose work it is to explore the dark) from the greater (the deer who likes the wild blueberry, or the moose that stood just beyond the screen door, knee deep in pond marsh, one glorious morning just before light). I no longer startle at mammal sounds. Trusting the safety of the tiny cabin, the warm bed, I note the sounds, breathe in, and give myself to sleep.

By 3:00 A.M., night is night. Silent. Black on a moonless night. The woods and I sleep deeply until the mallards and purple finches awaken and begin their glory work again.

That's when you hear dawn before you see it. The sky is still too dark to make out the line of pine and birch on Emerson Island, or my kayak, which waits for me, tied with old rope to the creaky dock, a few feet away.

If the wind is just so you can feel mist rising from the pond, and smell the damp remains of last night's campfire.

Within minutes I am able to delineate pond and pine. Then pine and sky. The loon calls from the southern end of the island soon after 5:00 A.M. I always hear the morning loon call. There is nothing to interrupt it. It echoes down the pond, through the screens of our cabin where I lie somewhere between the need for the smell of sleep on the blankets that tangle me, and the need for hot coffee in a warm mug and a trip in my kayak, down the pond toward the sun rising over the Ossipee Range, through the pattern of sound and silence of which I am a faithful student.

I choose the kayak. A bass surfaces ten feet away. It flips up into the morning air for just a moment, the sun reflecting every color of its small perfection. I lay my paddle across my lap and rest to consider the spreading concentric circles it leaves as it swims away.

I lift my mug and sip comforting coffee I boiled on the camp stove; then recite a psalm, or a poem, or a list of thanks, adding my sound to the ones that have already been offered. For hours. For years. By birds and trees and every living thing at the edge of Lee Pond.

I turn back toward the camp and climb carefully from my kayak. A water snake slithers in the warm water near my feet but I am not afraid. Ding Martin taught me years ago that the snakes of Lee Pond are more afraid of me than I of them.

I walk slowly on wet, bare feet across pinchy ground cover toward our little place: the gathering of Adirondack chairs around the campfire, the cinder blocks we use as end tables or foot rests, and the old metal pail that we, good scouts, fill with pond water and keep at the ready just like Dad taught us.

At the center of this small scene is a gathering of rocks, formed in a circle beneath towering bull pines that drop sappy cones and dry needles and branches. Granite rocks. That's all you would think they are. A small ring of them with a few half-burned logs leaning against each other.

But they are not only rocks—those small chunks of New Hampshire granite—they are a symbol of the year I had to find a way past illness to be my daughters' mom again. From the summer I had spent presumably recovering from surgery.

"Come to New Hampshire," my mother had said to me. "The mountain air will make you well. Just like in *Heidi*."

So my good husband packed up our daughters. Packed up his wife, and drove us from the city to my family's land in the shadow of Red Hill.

But I didn't get better. Instead, I lost ground.

Weak—emptied of the life force I took for granted—unable to walk, without assistance, from the edge of the pond to the front door of my mother's house, a few hundred feet away. I—who had hiked steep mountains for the pleasure of the burn in my muscles and the tug of air into my heaving lungs—I couldn't walk without leaning on the shoulder of my own young child.

Hours. Long days. Weeks. I sat in an Adirondack chair, my head back, eyes closed, waiting for health to return. Despairing it would not.

Slowly and mysteriously my health had left me months before—months where at first I had simply thought I was too busy. Tired. Run down. But then I discovered the lump. Recognized the gravity of the constant sore throat. The continuous fever. The swollen lymph glands. But the tumor was benign. Why was I getting worse?

I watched my daughters set out in the canoe toward the big rock where they liked to swim: watched with the knowledge that if they needed help, there was nothing I could do. I could not paddle to them, swim to them, or walk on water, as I'm sure I would have done when I was well.

When you are long ill you can't remember anymore how you used to be.

Waking in the morning, hours after my family had started their day, I'd walk up to my mother's from the cabin for a little visit, trying to appear normal. I'd ask what everyone was doing and feign interest. Ability.

I know, too well, what it means to have a sick parent. What it is like to stand next to the bed where they are asleep yet again (will they sleep forever?). You speak to them, call them. But your young, needing voice does not reach them. They are lost to illness.

I know how that takes away a piece of trust you never get back. Was I now doing that to my children? Oh, God. Are you seeing this?

I would return to the cabin for another nap. Sometimes my mother would walk down to check on me. To wake me. Be sure I was still breathing. Sometimes she brought a cold cloth to wipe my face. Or she would lean over me, and take my drawn face in both of her beautiful, slender hands, as if pushing her life into me.

We would walk slowly up the path to her house and sit together on the porch. One day I told her what I couldn't tell anyone else. That I thought I was slowly dying. And my biggest fear was that my girls would not remember the mom I really was. The one I had been only last summer.

I was a mother who encouraged adventures, just as my father always had. Who urged them to swim all the way to Walker's Point—don't be afraid, you can do it—the very first day I thought they were big enough. And when Jennie, at five, joined Elizabeth and me for her first swim out, she was too tired for the trip back. I was well then. The mother I wanted to be to my girls. So she climbed on my back, like a baby loon, and I, strong mother loon, swam her safely home.

But where was that mom I used to be? And who was this one who seemed to scare her very own children with her bleary eyes and shaky legs?

I adjusted myself in my chair where I sat near my mother, looking out at Red Hill. *I lift up my eyes unto the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.* But was there help for me? Really?

I believed God was aware of me and my despair. I was not so certain, though, He would intervene. Who is God in moments like these? And what should I ask for? Healing? Courage?

Did I dare risk my relationship with Him, the relationship I had struggled so hard to reclaim, by asking for anything at all? Was it better not to ask? To avoid disappointment?

Because if God doesn't respond at a time like this, what does that mean about every darn thing I have allowed myself to believe?

I lowered my eyes from the familiar view beyond the porch and looked down at my hands. My body was starting to harden again. There was something wrong with my muscles. With my joints. I could not stay in one position for more than ten minutes or my neck and hands and legs would stiffen. Cement replaced blood.

I was losing the ability to move. To lift my arms to braid my girls' hair. To carry food. I dropped plates. Small ones.

The days at the pond were interspersed with trips to the city for appointments with specialists. Blood tests. More specialists. The row of prescription bottles by my bed grew.

My husband did everything. Took care of our girls. Of food and laundry and the million daily tasks we used to share. He kept his business strong. Researched for hours, at the end of long days, for possible reasons for my symptoms. He brought me little bouquets of flowers from our gardens for my bedside table. Stayed awake with me when I couldn't sleep.

We tried hard to get me back. Every way we could.

There were trips every other day to the health store for fruits and vegetables, vitamins and teas. I drank gallons of peculiar juices. Tested my hair, my toenails, my saliva, my pee. Anything that might give a clue to what had happened. Where had I *gone*?

Then one afternoon, back at the cabin, I was waking alone from another deep nap. Roy had taken the girls to our house in the city to visit their friends. To check on the gardens and the

mail. To give me a few days without the pressure of guilt that their sad glances evoked in me.

I got the idea of a campfire. If all I could do was sit and stare, maybe I could turn that into something else. Something for me and my girls to do together. A campfire. It might be just the thing—my best shot at participating in their lives that summer. The only way I could think of.

So I carried rocks from the near woods, rocks the size of cantaloupes that the previous summer I could have hefted by the armload. But now I lugged one at a time. Rested. And considered, as I caught my breath, whether I could carry another.

I watched the strange days pass. Watched a good idea transform into hope. It was hope I had lost that now I was reclaiming. Why these changes happen, I cannot tell you. Is it prayer? Is it determination? Some important combination of both?

I only know that in this life I have witnessed, a few times, a moment when something hard gives, lets go, and a new way that seemed impossible becomes possible.

I was building a campfire for my girls. One rock at a time, I built a circle—my own monument to the decision to find a place somewhere between vibrant and ill. A place my father had not found. But that I was determined to.

It took a few days. This one, small thing. Roy and the girls were coming back soon and my project was not done. So I asked Richie and Ronda's children to help.

Benjamin, at six, was stronger than I that summer. And Emily, only four, could match my efforts. My brother's children. My god-children. I would show them this about God's grace: you don't always receive the clear answer, the miraculous solution—but you get a new way of looking at your life. And sometimes that is enough.

We had our first campfire that night when Roy, Elizabeth, and Jennie returned. Rich and Ronda walked over from their house on the other side of my parents' land. My mother, who preferred her screened in porch and a strong light for reading, was not so interested in a bunch of bugs, and heat, and smoke. But when I asked, "Mom, will you go over to Fuller's, and buy some graham crackers, and marshmallows, and chocolate bars? We're going to have s'mores tonight," she smiled a tremendous smile and hugged me.

They did not know, my daughters and nephew and niece, the significance of the campfire for me. But they did not have to. I knew.

None of us knew then, the many hours—some of our best—we would spend watching old logs and sappy pinecones burn down to embers whose flickering, mysterious coals we could not get enough of.

And then, as slowly as my health had left me, it now began to return. It was as if each chunk of granite I had carried to that small circle by the pond held something healing within it. Some radiating power. At least that's how it seemed to me.

At the end of the summer, we moved back home to the city for the girls' school and real life. I took up swimming. The warm water of the small therapy pool at the Y was what I preferred, but I needed the brightness of the morning light in the big one, so that's where I usually swam. Plus, I liked to be near the gals. That's what they called themselves, the members of the senior ladies aquatic aerobics class.

Most mornings when I arrived, they were already in the pool, adjusting to the water before their class began. They chatted, and waded through water up to their loose armpits, hairdos protected with baggy shower caps.

I walked slowly down the stairs into the pool and smiled as I walked past them to the lap lanes. My first lap was always cold. Made me clench. But by the third lap I was warmed. The morning light caught the bright spray of bubbles I blew into the water, expelling all that ached. It was as if I were watching illness leave my body.

I entered the pool, those mornings, as stiff as the old ladies. But I'll bet I looked young to them, and healthy, no doubt. Serious about swimming, what with my Speedo swim cap, my goggles, and all those uninterrupted laps.

But what they didn't know was that they helped me. The gals. They gave me courage. Each morning.

They called out greetings to each other, "Morning, Theresa," and "Morning, Ruthie." "Has anyone heard from Betty?" "What did the doctor say, Virginia?"

And they walked through the water lifting their arms in big circles and little circles, and laughed, and made jokes, while the young aquatic aerobics instructor played songs from *The Sound of Music* and urged them to reach higher. Higher.

Every day I swam my laps and looked up at them at each lap end. By the time I finished my routine I was loosened, warmed, and ready, like them, to begin the day.

I observed them as we all changed in the locker room. The ones who hid behind their towels, behind the curtained stalls. All that modesty seemed to make it hard to get your under-pants on.

I watched others unconcerned with nudity, with their aging bodies. All those beautiful, womanly bellies. They were a parade of confidence I gleaned from.

My favorite was the oldest woman in the class who leaned on her walker, pulling her tired, purple-splotched legs toward the showers. Afterward, she wiped a towel as best she could over her back and the enormous moles I hoped someone was

keeping an eye on. She had a joke or a concerned inquiry for everyone. She was joyful in a way I wanted to be. Not false. Not pretending. Just glad about life, even at her slow pace.

They were teaching me—my new swimming friends, whose names I didn't even know—a measure of gladness too.

It took a few more months before I could drive long distances again. Carry a load of wash from the basement. Go to the grocery store and buy strawberry yogurt and orange juice. Months before I came back fully to my children as their mother. But I came back.

It has been a few years now since the worst of my illness. I recovered from ten months of chronic fatigue syndrome. I have figured out ways around the fibromyalgia, one of those chronic immune illnesses the doctors tell me I will always have. Mostly these ways work.

The other night I was sitting around our campfire with my girls. Elizabeth, now taller than I, her tall mother, sat with the hood of her sweatshirt pulled tight against the mosquitoes. She was trying to get through *A Tale of Two Cities*; but Dickens was too dense for her.

She was irritated by her younger sister's attempts to play, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow," on a wooden flute. She was irritated that the mosquitoes seemed only to be going for her.

I told Jennie to put away the flute, and come over and sit on my lap. As she did, I thought about how she was growing, changing, and this might be the last summer she would eagerly climb on my lap and snuggle in.

"Mommy," she said to me, a bit heavy on my lap though I was trying not to notice, "I love you so, so much."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and pulled the cord of her sweat-

Beyond the Altar Call

shirt tighter. I laughed because I know what it is like to have a younger sibling who is too adorable sometimes. She laughed too and I winked.

“And you know,” Jennie said, picking up a long stick and poking around the sparking logs, “I *really* love a campfire. Aren’t they just so . . . so interesting?”

I leaned back against the Adirondack chair, where three summers ago I had barely been able to lift my head. I hugged my youngest daughter and her changing body to mine and said, “A campfire, Jennie Caley, is a very good thing to love.”

Elizabeth smiled and put down her book. It was getting too dark for small print words. I asked her to harmonize with me on a song and she did, as sure of the complementing notes as my mother had always been. My father would have loved it.

It was getting late. We were sleepy. I didn’t want to end the night yet, but I was cold. It was still early summer in New Hampshire. Night temperatures drop quick. I rested my feet on the chunks of granite, which had collected the strong heat of our campfire. The first bat swooped down toward us, beginning the pattern the night would bring to us again.

I watched the campfire with sleepy eyes. I watched each rock that encircled it as if it were a little poem. A poem about returning to the pond and hills and trees of your childhood when you most need them. About finding what you have always found there—healing.

Each rock contained the experience. And told of it again.

MY FAVORITE PART OF CHURCH was this: almost at the end of the hour, after the opening hymns, after the passing of the wooden collection plate, and after the endless sermon with its accompanying tears—the altar call.

The preacher would invite us all to bow our heads with him and close our eyes. He would say that he knew there were those out there who did not have Jesus in their hearts and who wanted to start a new life that very morning. He knew Jesus was reaching out to us even as he spoke. The piano player seemed to know too, and would begin the soft and loving chords of the invitational at just the right moment each week. We would join in and softly sing, “Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidd’st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come. I come.”

What more beautiful prayer do any of us form in our hearts than to be allowed to come into the presence of God, just as we are? That’s okay with Him. Sunday morning is slipping away

as quickly as the verses of the hymn. “And now will you please join me in singing verse three,” the preacher would call, “Just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come. I come.”

I was so moved by it all—by the preacher’s ability to see into our hearts, the lull of the chords, and the promise that we get to come just as we were—that I would ask Jesus into my heart every single week, just to be sure it took. When the preacher would ask for a show of hands of who had prayed the prayer with him, I would lift mine slowly and he would nod. I saw no harm in reinforcement. Nor in secretly looking around to see who else might be getting their name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life at just that moment.

When we were kicked out of the church, I knew they took a part of God away from me. They took the brand-new church building my Dad had helped to build, they took the congregation singing beside me, the people who loved me, and the right to belong. But they couldn’t take Jesus from my heart.

He promised He would stay with me if I only asked. And particularly since I had asked about thirty-nine times, I trusted that He had heard me.

My parents quietly helped in their own way to keep Him with us. Even though we no longer belonged to a church, my parents never stopped loving God. They sang our family’s favorite hymns on every car trip we ever took, and sat with us as we said our bedtime prayers. We had a plaque hanging over our kitchen table that reminded us, “In all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths.” It got so dusty sometimes you couldn’t quite make out the words, but we never did take it down.

And when, many years later, I came to be a mother myself, I taught our girls my parents’ favorite songs so that they know

every verse to “I Come to the Garden” and “The King of Love My Shepherd Is,” and “My Sheep Know My Voice.” I give them the best of what my parents gave me.

But at times I have feared for my children’s relationship with God. How could they really know Jesus if they didn’t sing, “Just As I Am” at the end of the service each week? I know that our relationship with God doesn’t depend on how we set up our service. And yet. There are some moments—so vulnerable and precious and important—that seem only to happen in a church that has an altar call. There’s a part of me that won’t quite rest unless God lets Billy Graham live long enough to do one more crusade in New England.

Maybe I need to rely more on God and less on the ways I think we get to God. To stay clear of the trap that there is only one, exact way it happens.

And so I find myself worshiping with my husband and our girls in an old, stone Episcopal church in the middle of the city, far from the plain wooden pews of The First Church of God. Far from the harmony of a gospel hymn. From the tearful plea. There is a certain stately, Episcopalian disdain for things too emotional. And perhaps, for me, this is the safer place for now.

I’ve been attending All Saints for seventeen years and yet it sometimes still feels new. Why do I still even go to a God church? Why don’t I just go Unitarian, or skip church altogether and enjoy the leisure of the jazz brunch?

Because I need Him. It isn’t just community I’m seeking. I’m seeking God. The God I was brought up on. And the more complicated God I’m coming to know. The God I belong to. No matter what anyone has ever said.

So each week, with the gentle order of the liturgy to guide me, I give it another try.

And I go to All Saints because it doesn’t matter if I’m good or if I’m not good. (If you break the rules you get to try again.)

I go because at my church it is not about the individual power of some pastor or priest or prophet. It is about some words that have been around a long time. And I like words. I like stories. Especially a story that isn't always clear, that has a contradiction or two—just like me—so I love the Bible. I'm not one to toss it aside as outdated or mistranslated. I need and count on the fact that it's an ancient mixture of what is most human and most godly.

I go to church because someone will read me an old poem that's been read a lot of times before and I like old poems. And the choir will sing a psalm of the shepherd, David, who grew up to be a king, and he was good and he was not good, just like me and God still called him his friend. I like that part a lot.

And then someone reads from one of Paul's letters and I can have my usual struggle with Paul. But there is room for both Paul and me at my church.

And then the priest holds up the Bible and he doesn't look around at each one of us and smile or not smile. It isn't about whether he likes us or not. He carries the Bible slowly, slowly right out into the congregation and stands with us because, as you may remember, *the word was made flesh and dwelt among us*. And each week in that simple, slow act of the procession we are reminded again of His longing to be with us wherever we might be.

The priest chants the gospel and it doesn't matter if it's with a good voice or a bad voice. It's not a performance. It's an anonymous voice telling us again what Jesus said.

And it is this anonymity. This sameness. The ancientness of it. That's what satisfies me.

I like that no one talks to each other a lot before the service. It's not a party. People get on their knees and try to be still.

The prayers of the people we recite were written so long ago, so very long ago, that you don't get stuck with that loud

lady in the back always giving her prayer needs like they are the only ones that matter. You get to silently add your own. Everybody does. I pray for my husband and our girls. My mother. My brothers. Their families. For the people of my town. And for my cousins and friends.

And there are no surprises—that's what I'm trying to say—no Bible throwing, no scary prophecies that suggest you are not quite up to ecclesiastical snuff. There are no surprises, only the quiet, precious reassurance each week: *I am with you, always. I don't change*. It amazes me every time I hear it. And it is all I need.

Church and Barns

FOR THIRTY YEARS I SEARCHED for a safe place to worship. Now that I seem to have found it, I wonder how it is that I am so at home in the vast stone building with its peculiar liturgy I was not brought up to understand or to need.

But one morning, as I knelt there to pray, I understood. It was not just a church I had entered, but also a barn. Someone had left the high windows open and a small bird swooped down, looping in the high air the way so many barn swallows had in my childhood.

I saw the vaulted ceiling as hand-hewn beams arching the barn roof. The high altar pointed east, as did our largest barn door, and the long, wide aisle leading to it was nothing but an immense expanse of barn floor. The side chapels were like pens, as if each were holding a little universe of horse and goat.

I genuflected, sat down, looked around and almost laughed out loud. The priests had taken their places in their stalls. Their

stalls—that's what they're called. I did laugh and a priest looked out dourly at me, not unlike a chewing cow.

I saw the sun coming in the windows and watched the incense rising, representing our prayers ascending to heaven. I thought of the way we used to throw down a bale of hay from the loft to the main floor and the way hay dust rose on a sunbeam.

My love for our barn and my longing for church seemed to meet for me in that moment. I felt a physical sense of home. Of the holy familiar.

And I feel it each time I leave my seat to walk up the long aisle to the altar, a walk that takes about as long as from one end of a barn to the other. I walk well-known steps to receive the earthly elements of bread and wine, which change in a way I do not need to understand, into the very presence of Christ.

I walk with others, like me and not like me, to answer another kind of altar call. The call to come. To taste and see. No one forces the gift. You answer by walking toward it. Down the long aisle, up the stairs of the chancel where the voices of young boys sing so high you will likely confuse the sound with birds at dawn or heaven itself, and then toward the altar rail crowded shoulder to shoulder with those in need of sustenance.

I bring myself and everything I have ever been to the altar.

I cup my hands and lift them silently and humbly to receive the essence. The priest places the bread tenderly, the way I might have fed our lambs. I taste the plainness of wafer and the mystery of Communion as I work my tongue and teeth around the gift, never quite comprehending; and never minding that I don't. God comes to me anyway.

And then the shared cup. The priest approaches, tilting silver toward my lips and my mouth fills with wine, and my head

warms, and my throat, and I look up to regard the tangled vines of bittersweet wound at the base of each altar candle, at the open tabernacle, and the cross. I take in all of the richness of color and warm wine, of candles flickering in the mixture of the altar's shadows and morning light, of voices lifted beyond us toward Him. It is only a moment, but it is enough.

I feel my knees stiffen on the lumpy and hard mats where I kneel, receive, and ponder.

Then I must step away to let another come for that moment unlike any other. I push myself up from the rail, fold my hands together, and walk back, changed, toward the world where I live.

*The House
Where the Hardest
Things Happened*

A MEMOIR
ABOUT BELONGING

Kate Young Caley

DOUBLEDAY

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND