

Out of the depths

The psalmists of the Bible often sound as if they're drowning.

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue



Photo by [Blaque X](#) from Pexels

I hear the word at home, I hear the word making the rounds of my parish, and I find that lately I say the word quite often about myself: *overwhelmed*. The poet W. H. Auden dubbed the middle of the last century “The Age of Anxiety;” based on a complaint one hears everyday, we might dub our era “The Age of Overwhelming.” Whether one talks to a working mother who “has it all” or a conscientious high school student who also seems to have it all—much of it stuffed into a ponderous backpack—the sense one often gets is that of a person struggling in deep water, which is what the word “overwhelmed” suggests. To be “whelmed” is to be “covered by water.” To be “overwhelmed” is to be drowned, or nearly so.

Certainly this is not a new condition, though its contemporary appearance might be new. Probably our ancestors were sometimes just as overwhelmed as we—though I

imagine that negotiating the obstacles of physical mass and geographical distance was what most often overwhelmed them. Walk home from where your car breaks down on a lonely road or haul water during a power failure, and you may have some inkling of what it was like to feel overwhelmed in the 19th century, A.D. or B.C.

Our overwhelming, of course, comes in different forms. To put it ironically, if perhaps simplistically, we find ourselves overwhelmed precisely *because* of our ability not to be overwhelmed by the things that overwhelmed our ancestors. We have made their world smaller, but only to run more frantically back and forth over its surface. We have made their burdens lighter, but only to carry more of them on our backs. We no longer need to pull on our boots in order to carry a message, but we wear holes in our slippers getting up to answer the phone.

It may seem as though I'm heading down the well-worn path that leads to Thoreau's cabin in the woods, or at least to Thoreau's famous dictum: "Simplify, simplify, simplify." That path is well worn for a reason. Examining my overwhelming life, I have no responsible course but to think in terms of cutting back or letting go. Not least of all I need to consider asking for help. A sense of being overwhelmed is often like the cry of an inner prophet: Repent or face the consequences. Here in northeastern Vermont I know of a number of people who heard that cry in some bustling place and migrated to find what they hoped would be a "simpler" life. A few actually found it.

More than a few, however, baled their boat out of one wave only to be swamped by another. And many of my neighbors cannot survive an overwhelming wave simply by throwing some "dispensable" cargo into the sea. The cargo has already been reduced to the essentials: groceries, childcare, children. It makes little sense to calm the storm by starving, though sailors have sometimes done just that, only to resort to cannibalism afterward.

Beyond our ability to simplify our lives, and beyond our belief that every predicament has a solution—which is itself a part of the do-it-all, have-it-all mentality that makes simplification so elusive—I wonder if being overwhelmed isn't a given of our humanity. Who can live a loving, purposeful life and not be overwhelmed, at least sometimes? The psalmists of the Bible often sound as if they're drowning:

The breakers of death rolled over me,
and the torrents of oblivion made me afraid.

What makes the image of Jesus walking on the water so powerful if not the symbolic implication that he is able to do what no one else, not even headstrong St. Peter, can do for very long?

It would seem, then, that a Christian approach to the problem of being overwhelmed works on two levels. The first of these is to discern, if possible, what part of the problem owes to an excess of ambition or a scarcity of justice. The second level, which hardly supersedes the first, is to remember that “we are dust,” that “here we have no true home” and that as long as we live, we are prone to suffer. Even if we manage to simplify, simplify, the world still cries, “Crucify, crucify.”

Those are all tired clichés, you might think. I would say rather that they *were* clichés, though they were never tired. They fell into disuse at around the same time as we began to believe that all problems could be solved and none needed to be suffered—the same time, in fact, as we fell headfirst into the sea.

Sometimes when I’m feeling overwhelmed, I remember the day my family and I took possession of our present home. The previous owner walked me along the boundaries of the property in the slushy snow of early spring. “I guess it’s time for you to take the helm,” he said. “I had to live here for a while before I realized that I would never ‘get caught up’ on this old place.” I have now lived here three times as long as he did and come to the same conclusion—though I have no immediate plans to move. For that matter, I have no immediate plans to die, though his words apply as much to my life as to my house. They can both seem too much for me.

At other times, though, when I look out over the wooded hills across the valley, or at a pair of hawks circling overhead, I feel overwhelmed by the beauty of what I see. There is that kind of overwhelming, too.

Might these two forms be part of the same awareness, two stanzas of the same love song? God sings the verses; we sing the refrain: “Out of the depths—of abundant beauty and of staggering responsibility—have I called to you, O Lord.”