

On not being afraid

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On vacation with my in-laws recently, we spent an afternoon at a water park. Shortly after we arrived, I looked up from unpacking sunscreen and swim diapers and couldn't immediately locate my one-year-old niece. I panicked, sure she was lying at the bottom of the deep end or had wandered off with a stranger.

We found her, not 15 seconds later, obstructed from view by a lounge chair. She was fine, not really missing at all, but my heart beat hard for the next ten minutes.

When I was pregnant with my first child, a friend said, "When you have kids, the world becomes a much scarier place." She was right. Every summer, I run across a story about a child who suffocated in the back seat of a hot car. Some time ago, I heard about a toddler who was strangled to death when his head got stuck in a soccer net. My son, ten months old, has taken to standing up in the slippery bathtub, and I am just waiting for him to crash down onto the hard tile.

As I grow older, I'm increasingly scared of heights. I stay away from balconies. I can't bear to watch when my daughter stands at the edge of something, even if the railing is high. I can scarcely stand to drive over tall bridges, particularly when the kids are with me.

But there we were at this water park, with two gigantic curly slides twisting their way down to the pool from three stories up.

Turns out my daughter was tall enough to try it out. She went first with her aunt, as I watched. I imagined her little body flipping up over the side (though children had been sliding down all day), or losing her footing in the pool at the bottom (despite the lifeguard there for just that purpose). She survived, of course, and wanted to go again. The other adults were occupied, so she looked to me.

“Want to try the lazy river?” I asked hopefully. But she’d known the thrill of the slide and would not be sated by gently meandering through water on an inner tube.

So up we went. I gripped her hand tightly. My fears were not eased by the fact that we had to wait ten minutes while the lifeguards tended to a situation in the pool below. No one was seriously injured, apparently, but there were forms to fill out, parents to notify.

Finally it was our turn. My daughter watched for the lifeguard’s nod, then sat down and let go. The water rushed her away, and then the lifeguard was nodding at me. *A four-year-old just did this, I said to myself. This is fun.*

Halfway down, I realized that it actually was. I was not going to hit my head or be tossed over the side. It was exhilarating, actually, to let myself go with the curves of the slide, the cool of the water against the hot air above. I used to love water slides. I had forgotten what it felt like.

“Do not be afraid,” God tells people over and over again—Abram as he’s about to leave everything behind, Mary as she learns she is going to be a mother, the disciples as Jesus walks toward them on the stormy sea. The life God calls us to is full of pitfalls and danger, accidents and tragedies. But beyond our fear, that life is exhilarating. Doesn’t God want us to delight in family and water and sunshine and the fact that we have figured out a way to safely hurl ourselves from three stories up?

When I splashed into the pool at the bottom of the slide, there was my kid, arms pumping above her head, cheering me on. “Can we go again, Mom?” she asked, as soon as I wiped the water from my eyes. That time, it was fun all the way down.