

Life of Pi, love of God

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

December 3, 2012

"I just want to love God."

Piscene Patel, [Life of Pi](#)

A boy, the son of a zookeeper, grows up in picturesque Pondicherry, India. He is bright and inquisitive and unusually attuned to the world around him. He is, by place of birth, a Hindu, and a devout one. He discovers Christianity (*"Thank you, Vishnu, for introducing me to Christ"*), and then finds the religion of Allah, especially its profound witness to the practice of daily prayer, to be life-giving.

His parents are perplexed. (*"If you believe in everything, you will end up not believing in anything at all,"* warns the boy's rationalist father). His older brother, as older brothers are sometimes wont to do, sneers, scorns, and mocks the young boy's earnest faith.

The boy, Piscene Molitar Patel, named by an uncle after a famous Parisian swimming pool, is patient with his critics and resolved to love God and the world and everything-*everything*-in it. As a teenager, a shipwreck and a harrowing ordeal in a lifeboat sharpen rather than diminish or extinguish his religious sensibilities. He emerges with a story, he says, that *"will make you believe in God."*

* * * * *

It is tempting to dismiss *Life of Pi* as a parable of the postmodern quest for "spiritual fulfillment" without the messiness of doctrinal commitment, to see Pi as a cipher for what each of us is encouraged to be: a discriminating consumer of religious experience-trying on this or that belief or practice, picking and choosing what "works" for us, discarding or ignoring the rest.

I understand the temptation.

But I also think there's something more or something else at work in the life of Pi. During his 227 days at sea, the necessities of survival (killing sea creatures with his

bare hands and wolfing them down ravenously, animal-like) merge with his emerging sense of his own insignificance. After witnessing a spectacular display of thunder and lightning, Pi says (in the [book](#), but not in the movie):

“For the first time I noticed—as I would notice repeatedly during my ordeal, between one throes of agony and the next—that my suffering was taking place in a grand setting. I saw my suffering for what it was, finite and insignificant . . . My suffering did not fit anywhere, I realized. And I could accept this. It was all right.”

With its echoes of the book of Job and the Psalms, this is not the sentiment of the contemporary seeker-shopper of religious goods and services. It is not the familiar narcissism of much of middle-class Christianity, nor is it the well-meaning but hollow piety of the “God-never-gives-us-more-than-we-can-handle” school of thought.

And after calculating his odds of outliving his lifeboat companion, a 450 lb. Bengal tiger named Richard Parker, Pi says: “You might think I lost all hope at that point. I did. And as a result I perked up and felt much better.” This, too, reveals not the sunny optimism of religious individualism (“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”) but a clear-eyed embrace of a fundamental truth of existence: we are going to die.

When Pi makes peace with this truth he gets on with the business of living which, in his case, immerses him in the material exigencies of his plight: paying attention to the weather, monitoring his food supply, training his carnivorous companion. But it also means attending to the glorious beauty around him: inky-black skies swimming with stars, whales elegantly breaking the water’s luminous surface, a school of dolphins moving synchronously as if in a dance of pure joy.

And at journey’s end, when the middle aged Pi, who has been narrating the story all along, tells an aspiring novelist that he regrets not being able to thank Richard Parker and tell him that he loved him, we glimpse the young Pi Patel again, who was attentive to beauty, full of wonder and a desire for the holy, who only wanted to love God and the world, and who might have—as a Hindu, a Christian, and a Muslim—found a kindred companion in a contemporary poet’s own [clear-eyed assessment of the truth of our finitude](#).

Originally posted at [Intersections](#)