

Splash: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Splash.”

Readers Write in the [November 2023](#) issue



Getty (clockwise from upper left): onebluelight / jbryson / Denis Burkin / Thomas Pajot

In response to our request for essays on *splash*, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are *gap* and *help*. [Read more.](#)

“An old silent pond. / Into the pond a frog jumps. / Splash! Silence again.”
It is perhaps the best known of all Japanese haiku. No subject could be more humdrum. No language could be more pedestrian. Basho, the poet, makes no comment on what he is describing. He implies no meaning, message, or metaphor. He simply invites our attention to no more and no less than just this: the old pond in its watery stillness, the kerplunk of the frog, the gradual return of the stillness.

—Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*.

The Buechner Narrative Writing Project honors the life and legacy of writer and theologian Frederick Buechner with the aim of nurturing the art of spiritual writing and reflection.

I know how Peter felt. I didn't try to walk on water, but I did try to come to the surface again after not so willingly diving off in an “abandon ship” simulation at Great Lakes naval training center. We were asked if we knew how to swim, but after witnessing the ridicule of those who admitted they didn't, no way was I about to confess. So I took the alternative: climb the ladder to the high dive and, at the order, jump or be booted off. I jumped.

After the most ungraceful dive ever attempted, I hit the water with a tremendous splash. I went down, and down, and down. It was a taste of eternity before I felt myself coming back up again. By then I had given up all hope of resurfacing. But I did. Coughing and sputtering, I thrashed my way to the far end of the pool. I passed, with the fervent prayer that if ever I was assigned to a ship, it would never founder.

To avoid the draft and the prospect of being assigned to the infantry, a friend and I had enlisted in the Coast Guard when we were 17 years old, juniors in high school. Our early training was in port security and small boat handling. After graduation, however, when we were called up for our two years of active duty, we each were assigned to shipboard service, my friend as a damage controlman and I as a quartermaster or navigator and helmsman aboard icebreaker/buoy tenders. My ship's home port was Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, from which we tended aids to navigation (buoys, channel markers, and lighthouses), provided search and rescue services, and broke ice for lake freighters from Buffalo, New York, to Duluth, Minnesota.

An old military transport plane touched down at Soo CG base on a snowy, cold November evening, and I disembarked to board my ship. Not many hours later we got the call to assist a freighter which had lost power on Lake Superior, and I got my first taste of that lake's fury. It very soon brought back dark memories of my "abandon ship" drill, and with it the clutching fear of jumping into that icy water. It didn't help when one of the old hands asked, "How ya' doing, kid?" and, at my stammering reply, said, "Just remember: ya' gotta' go out; ya' don't gotta' come back!"

The Coast Guard's official motto is *Semper Paratus*—always ready—but my shipmate's citation, I was to learn, is its unofficial motto. You do your best in accord with your training, you deal with the consequences to the extent you can, and sometimes you succeed. Sometimes you don't.

Years later, after receiving my discharge and attending college, seminary, and graduate school, I was invited to preach at my home church. I very much looked forward to seeing those beloved folks again, but I was puzzled about what message I could bring them. Then it occurred to me that the Coast Guard's unofficial motto may be as good a paradigm as any for the Christian life: with your baptismal or confirmation or membership vows you sign on, and if you are serious about it, you go where you feel God sends you or do what you feel called upon to do. But there are no guarantees of success, just the promise that the Spirit is with you even unto the ends of the earth.

That was my sermon. Ya' gotta' go out; ya' don't gotta' come back.

Herb Evert

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New York State raised me. I was nurtured by nature—swaddled by the Hudson River and High Tor Mountain—in the arms of a village named Haverstraw. The Hudson's tide rose to the backyard we shared with our cousins who lived next door. After spending long hours playing tag, hide-and-seek, or Mother may I, we would look for flat rocks, stand on the bank, and skip them across the river's surface. The small stones made a gentle splash as we tried to get them to bounce again and again before sinking underneath the surface.

Pop—the solid, strong, loving father figure in our intergenerational home—taught me how to skip rocks. I was six years old the day he left for work and never returned. The way I remember it, he got sick at work and was taken to a hospital, where he lay on a cot in the back of a crowded ward for several days before he died from a heart attack. Our home was never the same after that. The house was invaded by a spirit of depression that swallowed up Big Ma like a large boulder thrown into the dark abyss of the sea, making a splash so much louder than the tiny ones we made skimming stones across the Hudson. Within a year, she was gone too. According to my grown-up relatives, Big Ma’s cause of death was a broken heart.

I learned early in life that people you love sometimes leave you. Given the losses I had experienced, I’m not sure why I believed the Sunday school teachers who taught lessons about the one who would never leave me. Yet my childlike faith somehow gave me an assurance that the God they talked about was everywhere, all the time, watching over me.

Decades after we grew up and moved away to another state, my sister and I drove our middle-school-age children to New York for a weeklong vacation. We stayed at our brother’s house, less than ten minutes from our childhood home on the banks of the Hudson. Rather than making the usual day trips to Manhattan, this time we took our children to our favorite attractions as kids growing up in suburban Rockland County. The threesome—our sons and my daughter—needed this time to clear away the constant stress of the structured classroom environment and the pressure of exams. But I felt especially obligated to provide a temporary escape for my two children, who upon returning to their own home would learn that their parents would be getting a divorce.

Our first outing with the kids took place at Bear Mountain, the state park my siblings and I had traveled to twice a week on a school bus during summer day camp. That day, we settled in one of the shaded picnic groves, where we unpacked homemade sandwiches, juice boxes, and chips to enjoy an afternoon lunch by the lake.

Sitting there, I felt a sense of stillness and serenity, mixed with a longing to relive my childhood experience of lighthearted summers when life had not yet required me to carry the heavy ache of abandonment. I found a tiny rock, smooth on top and flat on the bottom, and asked our three young ones, “Do you know how to skip rocks?”

They admitted they had never heard of such a thing. So I moved near the edge of the lake, positioned myself for a side-armed swing, and with a flick of the wrist I tossed the first stone. I was surprised by my immediate recall of what it was like to see more than hear the splash as the small rock hit the water, causing a ripple before bouncing to a second, tiny splash. “Come on, try it,” I said.

It didn’t take much urging. All three started searching for the perfect rocks in size, shape, and texture before excitedly trying their hand at skimming the stones into the lake, one right after another. I watched and coached, trying to help them understand the point of it all. I explained that the goal was not to throw the rock the farthest but to see how many times your rock would bounce on the surface before sinking.

Apparently there is a science to skipping rocks—it has something to do with velocity, gravity, angles, and lift force. Looking back now on that day at Bear Mountain, I would have cared less about explaining the physics behind the sport to my two middle schoolers. I would have told them instead that very soon life was going to be a succession of little splashes, but the God they believed in would continuously be the force behind each bounce they encountered, lifting them above and carrying them through to the next one, time and time again.

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Sunny summer days in June would dry the hay in the fields very quickly. On the farm, we knew that meant hard work would soon come about. When it came time to bale the dried hay, the whole family and maybe even the neighbor farmer and crew would help. My father would joyfully call out, “All hands on deck!” Everyone in the family would respond.

With the temperature soaring, the job took a lot of effort. In the field, the tractor would pull the baler that would pick up the hay, press it into bales, and throw them into the wagon. It was a one-person job. But unloading the hay and packing it away in the barn? That was where the hot, dusty, heavy work was done. The tractor would pull a wagon full of hay up to the elevator, and we would unload the bales onto the screeching elevator as it conveyed them into the barn. Then came the task of stacking those bales, one layer at a time.

My job was to help my big sister unload the wagons. The first loads were exciting. But when one load was done, it would not be long before the next came. Load after load of hay would go up the elevator. The sun was hot, the dust was dirty, and we tired by midafternoon. But the loads kept coming, one after the other. Our muscles got sore, the sweat continued, the dust kept flying. Finally, by late afternoon, the last load arrived. The bales went up the elevator, and the last one was piled away. The screeching elevator suddenly was quiet.

Evening chores would soon start, but first my brothers and I would do something I will never forget. We would run to the clothesline, pull off our swimming trunks, put them on, and run down the lawn to our pond. Hot, sweaty, and dirty, I would run off the dock and jump into the cool, clean water with a great splash. I would linger under the water, letting the sweat and the dust and the struggle of the day fall away. All too soon I had to go up for air.

Our swim didn't last long before it was time for the evening chores and the milking of the cows. But that splash in the water washed us clean, cooled us down, and reinvigorated us.

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As the people of God, we are well acquainted with water. If you were baptized as an infant, you probably don't remember it. But the community of faith does. Periodically, I take out my christening bulletin from my Methodist church just to remind myself that it did indeed occur in the earliest of my earthly days. Regardless of when you were baptized, how much water was used, or the exact liturgy attending it, we each are asked to live as though we have been completely immersed, submerged, and subsumed into God's love. Because it's the truth.

Paul Tillich wrote that salvation consists of accepting that we are accepted. The challenge we each have is to continually go with the flow of that living water. How often the Spirit of God has to splash us in the face to get our attention, or at least to make us slow down and look in the mirror.

I almost died at my second baptism. Well, maybe not quite. I was immersed in the baptismal pool at the Southern Baptist church of my youth. The pastor lost his grip, and I lost my footing, so there was a bit of splashing around. It may have appeared

to the congregation as if I was fighting the process. But who among us hasn't fought our baptism at many points along the way? It is a good thing we don't see the end from the beginning, because who knows how many of us would persevere. For we do die at our baptism, but we are raised to new life in the process. And the rhythm of our days forever after is one of dying and rising, dying and rising. When I discovered the Episcopal Church, I begged my rector to let me be baptized yet again, because I felt that the first two did not signify my glorious discovery of a spiritual home. He set me theologically straight. I had been splashed quite enough in the name of the triune God and could claim both the christening and the dunking as all part of that same divine splash of grace.

This ritual act, fraught with so much fragmentation of understanding as to cause the creation of new denominations around its practice, is, regardless, our obedient response to God. Some traditions grant baptismal names, but God has given us our baptismal name: Christ-bearer. No name that we have ever been given or called carries this kind of power. If we, the baptized, listen very closely, we can hear a divine whisper in our spirits, calling us by name and telling us just who and whose we are. And in the meditation of your heart, you might just hear a gentle swirling, a splash of water: the birth sounds of a new beginning.

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