

## **I Tripped and Fell**

Matt Alspaugh

Feb. 24, 2008

Readings:

The Bare Arms of Trees

John Tagliabue

Sometimes when I see the bare arms of trees in the evening  
I think of men who have died without love,  
Of desolation and space between branch and branch,  
I think of immovable whiteness and lean coldness and fear  
And the terrible longing between people stretched apart as these branches  
And the cold space between.  
I think of the vastness and courage between this step and that step  
Of the yearning and fear of the meeting, of the terrible desire held apart.  
I think of the ocean of longing that moves between land and land  
And between people, the space and ocean.  
The bare arms of the tree are immovable, without the play of leaves, without the sound of  
wind;  
I think of the unseen love and the unknown thoughts that exist between tree and tree  
As I past these things in the evening, as I walk.

from *Let Your Life Speak*, p. 62 - 64.

Parker Palmer

It is odd that some of my most vivid memories of depression involve the people who came to look in on me, since in the middle of the experience I was barely able to notice who was or was not there. Depression is the ultimate state of disconnection – it deprives one of the relatedness that is the lifeline of every living being.

...

Blessedly, there were several people, family and friends, who had the courage to stand with me in a simple and healing way. One of them was a friend named Bill who, having asked my permission to do so, stopped by my home every afternoon, sat me down in a chair, knelt in front of me, removed my shoes and socks, and for half an hour simply massaged my feet. He found the one place in my body where I could still experience feeling – and feel somewhat reconnected with the human race.

Bill rarely spoke a word. When he did, he never gave advice but simply mirrored my condition. He would say, “I can sense your struggle today,” or, “It feel like you are

getting stronger.” I could not always respond, but his words were deeply helpful: they reassured me that I could still be seen by *someone* – life-giving knowledge in the midst of an experience that make one feel annihilated and invisible. It is impossible to put into words what my friend’s ministry meant to me. Perhaps it is enough to say that now I have deep appreciation for the biblical stories of Jesus and the washing of feet.

To a Young Woman Whose Hurt Has Never Stopped  
Jim Moore

Yesterday, I listened carefully.  
How you were broken, and again broken.  
How you were trained to the breaking.

We stood at the edge of a river.  
You looked down as you spoke,  
as someone does who is shy.

But what did I hear as you spoke?  
I heard your pale forehead.  
I heard the trembling in your fingers.

I heard the silence of the birds  
all around us, as if they knew  
someone was speaking who must be heard.

And out of that silence you spoke.  
Even the crow stood mute  
under his black hood.  
Even the crow knew to listen.

Sermon:

Almost two decades ago, Liz and I were vacationing with my siblings and their partners, sailing and scuba diving in the British Virgin Islands. We decided to dive a shipwreck off one of the islands, and were assured by our local captain that he was familiar with the dive spots. Our captain wasn’t a diver, however, so he put us in at a spot with fairly strong current, a good distance away from the wreck. We began to descend, and found ourselves beginning to drift away from the wreck.

My siblings, all strong and experienced divers, were able to overcome the current and swim toward the wreck, but Liz and I couldn’t. As all good dive buddies should do, we communicated, with hand signals and we decided to surface.

Now we found ourselves in even stronger current, far from our boat, and drifting at an alarming rate toward the open sea. We finally waved down another boat that happened to be passing by, and after we convinced them that we weren't waving just to say Hi, they gave us a lift, or rather a tow, back to our own boat. Only then was I able to track the panic that had been coursing through me; fortunately, Liz's inexperience as a diver kept her from being too upset, either with the situation, with me, or with the captain of our boat.

This story is only one example of many personal experiences I can bring to mind – and I am sure, that most of you could also recall without much effort – of living through a close call, a failure, a disappointment. A time when we fell down, hard.

Sometimes our plans are foiled, as in our scuba experience. Sometimes, we get surprised by an unexpected turn of events, a job loss, a medical crisis, a betrayal. Sometimes we find the going much harder and slower than we expected. We think we are making good progress toward a destination when we begin to realize, if our eyes are open, that the destination is wrong for us. Sometimes we simply find ourselves adrift, and unable to swim against the current that is carrying us away.

I think the first step in dealing with a fall is admitting that we have fallen. This is sometimes harder for men than women. I'm sure that the underwater communications between myself and Liz that day went something like this: (diving hand signals: somethings wrong) (ok?) (follow me) (not ok) (go down) (not ok) (go up) (ok).

I think back to when I was laid off from a job. I had ignored all the warning signs, the souring economy in high tech, previous layoffs at the company, the marginalization of my job role. Yet I was still surprised to be given the pink slip. I've spoken with other men and know that this pattern common: we ignore the danger signs, denying even the possibility of a fall.

And the reality is that we take many falls in our lives. I think it is significant that in the traditional Catholic devotional, the Stations of the Cross, three of the fourteen stations involve Jesus tripping and falling, and an additional station involved the bystander Cyrene helping Jesus bear the cross. Those who practice use the Stations of the Cross as a devotional tool, walk a pilgrimage reenacting Jesus condemnation and death, and are invited to contemplate their own failures and shortcomings. In this pilgrimage they confront their own falls, their own hurting and suffering.

Once we understand we are hurting – assuming we do get to that point – who do we turn to for help? How do we ask? Are we clear, or do we expect people to intuit our situation? Like the boaters who thought we were just waving to say hello, our potential helpers may simply not recognize our need for help.

But even when people can see that we need help, we sometimes refuse to accept it. Again, this seems to be a particular problem with men, but it does not apply exclusively to them. We are wary of those bearing help, because all too often they show up with a mouthful of advice or, worse, a face frozen in judgment.

Sometimes we fear that if we ask for help, some form of reciprocation will be expected, and we don't want to be held accountable for that. After all, in our society, help in many forms can be purchased, whether healthcare or therapy or even spiritual direction, so it might feel easier to pay a professional than to make a personal connection – the kind that might come if we accept an offer of help from someone in a caring community like this one.

There is a deeper reason we fail to seek or accept help. To admit we need help is to give up power, to give up our independence. Ram Dass tells us, “we cling to notions of independence – it is the name of our national holiday – as if it were an essential condition of our well being.”<sup>1</sup>

I know this is true for me. Finding myself down and grappling with the question of whether to seek help or go it alone, has been a recurring struggle for me, returning at different points in my life. Yet when I do seek help, from friends, or from my minister, or from a professional, I've always felt a sense of joy and relief as we resolve the issue at hand. The landscape of despair, ashen grey, filled with vaguely recognizable contorted forms, gradually opens into green, moist fecundity of new possibility and new life.

But my reluctance to be vulnerable runs deep. Each time I find myself crossing again into the land of desolation, I tell myself, this time I can do it alone. There is pride involved in this. It's hard for me to ask for help. People around me – my wife, friends, teachers – find themselves walled off by a cordial but stubborn self assurance. I've been told it is called, “Minnesota Nice” here, but I can tell you, it is practiced in many other states, and I learned it well, in Houston, Texas.

Poet John Tagliabue reminds us

I think of immovable whiteness and lean coldness and fear  
And the terrible longing between people stretched apart as these  
branches  
And the cold space between.  
I think of the vastness and courage between this step and that step  
Of the yearning and fear of the meeting, of the terrible desire held  
apart.

And each time I try to go it alone, in lean coldness and fear, with terrible desire held apart, I learn again that I cannot. At best, my go it alone solution is a shadow of what might have been had others been involved. We all need the resources of the spirit, and those resources of the spirit are manifested in the help of other people. We need the courage to move from this step to that step, to meet, to accept, to surrender to the possibility of help.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help*, 1985, p. 135.

If we can get past fear, if we can find the courage to ask for help, it can come in many forms. I want to speak of the most basic, and yet the most difficult, which is simple human presence.

When Quaker teacher and author Parker Palmer was in one of his times of depression, – we heard about another one last week, and notice how openly this very wise teacher instructs us about the many lessons he has learned from falling, – his friend Bill visited with him. Bill found the one body part of Palmer that still had feeling, his feet. Bill connected to Palmer by rubbing his feet, and observing Palmer’s response. Palmer notes, “Bill rarely spoke a word. When he did, he never gave advice, but simply mirrored my condition. He would say, “I can sense your struggle today”, or, “It feels like you are getting stronger.” For Palmer, these words “reassured me that I could still be seen by someone – life-giving knowledge in the midst of an experience that makes one feel annihilated and invisible”.

Why the simple presence of another human being is so helpful is not fully understood by science. One possibility is the ‘simulation theory of empathy’<sup>2</sup>. In this theory, when one observes someone else’s behavior, certain systems of neurons in the brain are activated. These may be the system of ‘mirror neurons’ that have been identified initially in monkeys; these same neurons are active either when a task is performed or observed in others.<sup>3</sup>

So empathy works something like this. Suppose you are present with someone. You observe them carefully, or listen to their story attentively. In the act of observing or listening to their experience, your mirror neurons fire, and you have some emotional sensation that is similar to their experience. The emotions roil up in you, and the person you are with observes them. Now their mirror neurons fire, responding to the fact that you have experienced vicariously their situation, and the loop is closed. In a spiritual sense, we are bound more tightly to their experience, and our connection with them enables them to hold on to the emotion, really experience it, until they are able to transform it.

Note that the connection is subtle and emotional. If instead, we give advice to our hurting friend, rather than just allowing the emotions, we move to the mode of rational thought, and the connection is broken. If we make judgments, even unconsciously, about their situation, these get translated into emotional expression that moves both people away from the experience, and the connection does not close.

But we can listen empathetically, as Jim Moore suggests,

But what did I hear as you spoke?  
I heard your pale forehead.  
I heard the trembling in your fingers.  
I heard the silence of the birds

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.umsl.edu/~philo/Faculty/Gordon/MindSeminar99/papers/Gordon/np-enc.html>

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Damasio and Hanna Damasio, "Minding the Body", Daedalus, Summer 2006.

all around us, as if they knew  
someone was speaking who must be heard.

Can we learn how to do this kind of empathetic relating? I'm convinced it is more a matter of unlearning what we have been taught all too well. We need to be able to put aside all the judgment and technique and rationality. I have no science to back this up, but we can see it anytime we play with a baby or interact with a small child. Those who do not yet have anything to unlearn offer us a marvelous transparency into the empathetic connection. In the context of the spiritual work we do in this community, our Pastoral Care Associates practice this sort of empathetic relating. They learn to empty out judgment and technique, and practice just being with the people they visit. I commend this to you as beautiful and satisfying way to minister to those in this community.

Narsinha Mehta, a fifteenth century Hindu mystic, summarized this empathetic work:

They are the real lovers of God who feel others' sorrow as their own.  
When they perform selfless service, They are humble servants of the One.  
Respecting all, despising none, They are pure in thought, word, and deed.

So to open to others requires certain courage. We first have to have the courage to admit that we have fallen, that we are finite and imperfect and not at all who we thought we were. Then we must have the courage to risk the response of others, which in itself may be imperfect and honestly not always helpful. But when we are able to receive help with gratitude, we are also giving: we are creating the possibility that more of us can be interconnected in a network of mutual support and caring.

Finally, with what spiritual companionship we have, we must have the courage to enter the wilderness, to travel step by step through the inky gloom, to allow the emotions connected with the fall – be they fear, despair, or grief – to make themselves known and receive our full attention, to begin a transformative process that leads to new life and possibility.

The danger is that instead of traveling through this wilderness, we too often try to skirt it or sneak by it. The temptation is to do what recovery counselor Charles Whitfield calls 'spiritual bypass'. Bypass occurs when we use religious belief or spiritual practice as a distraction or avoidance from facing the pain that has come because we have taken a fall.

Ram Dass tells the story of the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Marpa, in his book, "How Can I Help?"<sup>4</sup>

One day, Marpa's eldest son was killed. Off by himself, alone with his grief, Marpa wept. One of his students approached him and said, "I don't

---

<sup>4</sup> Ram Dass, p. 85.

understand. You teach that all this is illusion, created by the clinging and desire and resistance. Yet here you are weeping. If all this is illusion, why do you grieve so deeply?"

Marpa replied "Yes, everything here is an illusion. And the death of a child is the greatest of these illusions."

Even after learning of the death of his son, Marpa concludes that even with his beliefs intact, grief still exists. It is necessary. In this knowledge he allows himself to grieve.

If we choose to travel through rather than over, to engage rather than avoid what psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan calls the 'dark emotions', we invite an emotional flow, a kind of alchemy that transforms these emotions into other spiritual strengths. Greenspan tells us, "I've found that unimpeded grief transforms itself into heightened gratitude; that consciously experiencing fear expands our ability to feel joy; and that being mindful of despair renews and deepens our faith."<sup>5</sup>

She goes on to say: "When we really get it that everyone alive experiences sorrow, fear, and despair, when we can tolerate these dark emotions in ourselves and others, they transmute into gratitude for life. They remind us of the exquisite fragility of life and our need to protect it. And they open us to a meaning system in which empathy and compassion are elevated to their true importance for ourselves and the world"<sup>6</sup>

Back on the boat, all those years ago, shed of our dive gear, and with the sun on our faces and the sea breeze in our hair, Liz and I were acutely aware of the fragility of life. We had also learned yet another lesson about our imperfections. About our weakness and inexperience, about my family's tendency toward independence over interdependence,. Over time, and by talking with each other and telling the story to friends, we were able to tell the story in a new light. What started as a situation that engendered fear and embarrassment and narrowly missed tragedy transformed into an adventure, an experience remembered with at least some measure of joy and with a great deal of gratitude. May we each open ourselves to the possibilities that come when we are able to transform the experiences of our tumbles and falls into spiritual strength.

---

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Platek, "Through a Glass Darkly", *Sun Magazine*, Jan. 2008, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*, 2004. p. 240.