

# “Breathing Underwater”

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Isaiah 40: 27-31

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It was good to get away and have some holiday. I had a great holiday – the hot weather which is oppressive in the city is lovely when you are beside a lake and can jump in and out of the water all day. Those of us from the GBA (Greater Brockville Area) are fortunate to have a river we can do the same with. How many of you went swimming this summer? I had only gone swimming in the river once before my holiday – which is ridiculous given that I really do like to swim.

But I have to tell you: I used to cling to my holidays. I used to live for my holiday and countdown the time until it came. There’s nothing wrong with looking forward to a holiday or even counting down to it, but for me there was a sense that I couldn’t survive without it.

When I was a kid, I loved the summer holidays but I also loved the weekends. I didn’t really like school much and so I had this image in my head that during the week I would dive under water and swim hard until Friday afternoon when I would climb up gasping for air onto the desert island called the weekend. But Monday would roll around too quickly, and I’d dive back into the water. I needed the weekend to survive the week and I needed the summer to survive the rest of the year. Now I don’t think school was all that bad, but it was a francophone school so I was operating out of a 2<sup>nd</sup> language which likely made it harder. But mostly I liked to play more than I liked to work. That’s probably still true.

A month or so ago, I gave you a great question that I learned to ask myself: “What is it that I think I need that I don’t actually need?” For a lot of my life I thought I needed the rest and recharging that came with the weekend or the holiday in order to survive the work of life. What is it that you depend on or think you need to survive the labour of life?

To be clear, I am not down on holidays or times of rest and renewal. I still love this time and will take all the holiday I am able to take. We live in a culture that is often go, go, go and that values productivity more than it values people. We have to be careful not to become a slave to work and a slave to a society that says earn more, spend more, do more. I think that my issue with living for the weekend is related to that consumer-driven society. We lean to the extremes and ignore balance. We push hard and brag about how many hours we work or volunteer and then burn out.

It is arguable that the number one sin in the Old Testament is idolatry. In the Old Testament the idols were mostly physical. Do you remember when Moses had been up on the mountain for too long and Aaron and the Israelites down in the wilderness decided to make a golden calf they could worship and pray to? That's an idol, but idolatry goes beyond turning an object into God. *Whenever we make something or someone, that isn't God into a god, we are committing idolatry.* When we cling to something — when we feel like we can't live without something: a holiday, time, money, a relationship, someone's approval, control over a situation, a particular outcome... the list goes on —it can become an idol. What is it that you think you need that you don't actually need?

Why would people ever make an idol? Why would we cling to something that is not God, as if we thought it could save us? I think it's because we feel afraid and overwhelmed and out of control. God knows we have lots of reasons to feel those things because life is hard and overwhelming.

We are a year and (I don't even know how many months – I've lost track) — into this pandemic. This has been a mass trauma that we've all gone through. Some of us have had other traumas and serious struggles layered onto this mass trauma. It's been a hard time. And let me tell you something about recovering from trauma — you don't begin to recover from it until it comes to an end and you are in a place where you feel safe. This means that we as a society, have likely not begun to recover from the trauma of this pandemic. When we actually get to that place of feeling safe, the process of healing from trauma is messy and chaotic and circular. It's two steps forward and one step back, and sometimes two steps back and only half a step forward.

I remember back in the winter one of our board members warning us about the 4<sup>th</sup> wave of the pandemic. She wasn't talking about the Delta variant; she was talking about a wave of burnout. After keeping it together for so long, many will be really struggling on a mental and emotional level. She pointed this out to us because she felt the church needed to be ready, because people were going to need the church to get through this and to recover.

If you are feeling more stressed out and burnt out, go easy on yourself. This is not unexpected. I also think stress levels are up because many are returning to school and the normal rhythm of the fall when nothing is yet normal. There is stress about that transition when we hoped that by September that we would continue to progress away from Covid.

It's been a very long time and instead of waiting for the break, for the vacation, for whatever it is we think we need, we need to learn to be resilient and to find our strength and renewal from a deeper source.

I want to read you a poem called "Breathing Underwater" by Sr. Carol Bieleck, RSCJ. I found it in a book by the same name written by Richard Rohr.

I built my house by the sea.  
Not on the sands, mind you;  
not on the shifting sand.  
And I built it of rock.  
A strong house  
by a strong sea.  
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.  
Good neighbors.  
Not that we spoke much.  
We met in silences.  
Respectful, keeping our distance,  
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.  
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,  
always, the sand between.  
    And then one day,  
    -and I still don't know how it happened –  
    the sea came.  
    Without warning.  
Without welcome, even  
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand like wine,  
less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.  
Slow, but coming.  
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.  
And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning and I thought of  
death.  
And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it reached my door.  
And I knew, then, there was neither flight, nor death, nor drowning.  
That when the sea comes calling, you stop being neighbours,  
Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance neighbours,  
And you give your house for a coral castle,  
And you learn to breathe underwater.

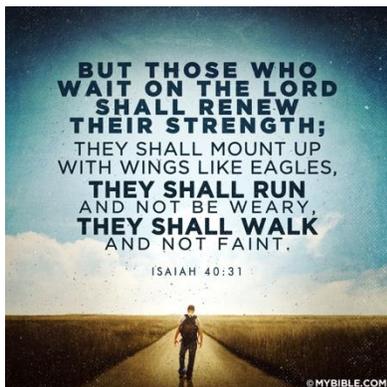
--Sr. Carol Bieleck, RSCJ

No matter how in control we think we are, no matter how careful and responsible we are, life can still overwhelm. Those of you who have gone through a cancer journey or other critical illness know this. Those of you who have suffered great loss know this. Thanks to the pandemic we all know this. We don't just know it with our heads, we know it in our body.

The people the prophet Isaiah was writing to knew this as well. They had been taken against their will to live in another country. They had lost everything: homes, farms, temple, and ability to worship and celebrate their culture –they had lost all semblances of normalcy and control and they had no idea if or when they would ever get back. Somehow, they needed to learn how to keep breathing and live and even thrive in this strange place.

How do we learn to breathe underwater? The first thing is to name and be aware that we are underwater. The first step in AA is “We admitted we were powerless [over alcohol] and that our lives had become unmanageable.” Powerless and unmanageable. Can you name where you feel where you are powerless and what is for you unmanageable? Naming it is the first step because until you name it you will continue to desperately flail and try to gain control anyway you can and you will cling to things that look like they float, that look like life-savers, but though they may satisfy for a short time, they won't save you.

Isaiah, the name of the prophet, means “God saves”. That is the message of this prophet over and over again. Worshiping where and how we used to would be wonderful — but God saves. Holidays are good, but God saves. No pandemic or protocols would be awesome, but God saves. More money, more time, more energy, more control, more health, more wealth, more respect, more... would be good, but more does not save. God saves.



Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and strengthens the powerless.  
Even youths will faint and be weary,  
and the young will fall exhausted; but those who  
wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they  
shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be  
weary, they shall walk and not faint.

I like this image of the scripture. Most images of this scripture focus on the eagle, and soaring like a eagle would be (and I suppose is) amazing. But the thing that I find intriguing about this scripture is that the normal pattern is to increase. You would expect that it would start by saying when you wait on the Lord, when you trust in the Lord you will walk and not faint, not only that but you will run and not be weary, and I know you're not going to believe this but that is not all... you are going to mount up with wings like eagles! But it's the opposite.

It starts with soaring, but not just that! It moves to running and, you're not going to believe this, but you are going to be able to walk and not faint. You see we long to soar and move fast ... but when we are truly connected to God it's often at that slow pace and in the quiet instead of the rush. That's a big part of learning to breathe underwater: slowing down and being truly present to God's presence. Opening ourselves to wonder and to mystery.

God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Do you see that? Let's take a moment to offer to God the parts of us – maybe all of us, our whole self – that are powerless, that are being overwhelmed by life.

Let us take a moment to acknowledge the Source of Life, the Creator of the ends of the earth, including the Creator of you. Let us take a moment to say in our heart "Isaiah...God saves".

Here is the amazing thing: when God gives us strength, God always gives more than we need. Our cup overflows. Enough to give away. We are not called to hoard that stash of strength and life — we are called to give it away to a weary, burnt out and anxious world. Our community, our world needs the church, needs a group of Christ followers who have learned to breathe underwater so that we might become lifesavers and life-givers. Let's pray to receive some of that gift to give away.