

FINDING GRACE IN HARD TIMES

by Lisa Holtby

“Life has got to be bigger than death, and love has got to be bigger than fear or this is all a total bust and we are all just going tourist class.”

-- Anne Lamott, Operating Instructions

This past year has been difficult. In February of 2001, our long-awaited first child died when I was nineteen weeks pregnant. To honor his little body, David and I chose not to have a D&E (dilation and evacuation), but rather to have labor induced and to birth our baby. We felt so fortunate to meet Jamey. He had his daddy's (and granddaddy's) feet, with second toes longer than his big toes. David and I were pierced with love for this beautiful boy. The worst moment was when the staff took my baby away, forever. No longer being able to protect Jamey was unspeakably painful. I keep his little bag of ashes in my bedside table, close to us. They look like a tablespoon of sand from the beach.

Later my students asked me if yoga helped with the pain of labor. No, I said, but morphine and an epidural sure did. However, the habits instilled by a decade of yoga practice did help me to burn cleanly through my grief. In yoga class, we practice simply witnessing our thoughts and emotions during *asana* and meditation. During the first few awful, raw weeks after Jamey died, David and I similarly gave our full attention to consciously grieving – talking, weeping, writing, and just sitting -- to fully experience the pain. I suppose I could have checked out with alcohol or drugs or QVC shopping, but I feel pretty good that the most self-medicating I did was with cocoa, cinnamon toast and detective novels. (And I did smash some glassware.) Being a compassionate witness for my pain and for David's pain was hard, but not unbearable.

Because *asana* practice has always brought me satisfaction and peace, I turned to hard physical work as a way to be with my grief. I needed to be alone, so in solitude I practiced yoga, worked out, and labored in my 'grief garden,' hauling rocks, digging weeds and taking up sod. These were comforting actions in an otherwise bleak time.

David and I choose to comfort ourselves with the belief that all Jamey knew was love: a blissful state of being in my womb, and at a soul level, a perception of our great joy and love for his simply being. I do not feel that Jamey's death was personal, unfair or punitive. As the Buddhists say, it is the nature of being human to die, to get sick, to age, to change. Jamey and I are simply, humbly, part of the human condition. If there is a divine reason for his short life, a bigger picture, than it is surely not ours to know. David wrote this sweet little limerick for our son:

“There once was a young man named Jamey,
Who didn't want life to get samey.
He came and he went,
The polite little gent,
But all the same, it was a shamey.”

Three months after Jamey died, I – miraculously, it seemed to me -- got pregnant again. Not so miraculously, growing a baby makes me terribly ill. Counting both pregnancies, I

was sick for eight months with profound fatigue and all-day nausea and headaches. In surrendering to serving as 'Hotel Mama,' I am learning that I am not my physical body. In yoga philosophy, the body is considered *annamaya kosha*, or a "food sheath" that houses our more important spiritual essence. I am experiencing that the essence of me continues in this frequently sick, tired body.

Due to problems with the placenta, I have been living with the very real possibility of losing our second son, Benjamin, as well, and have spent the last seven weeks on bed rest in the hospital. But thanks to my years of yoga and other spiritual practices, most of the time I am able to gently bring my mind out of its fearful, dark place, and to recognize that my emotions and thoughts are fleeting and not necessarily reflections of reality. My own pain has been transformative (though I would not have chosen this path) and my compassion for others' pain has deepened. Everyone experiences loss during their life, and I value that I've learned a little better how to be present for others, a quiet witness during hard times.

This year has shown me how strongly my mind is habitually oriented toward the future. I notice that I am literally not in the habit of fully enjoying or even fully showing up for the moment. During this hard year, I've had many dramatic opportunities to practice 'being here now.' When times are difficult, I've found that if I can keep my mind in the present moment, it is bearable. When times are sweet – like when I feel Benjamin busily scooting around in my belly -- I am acutely aware of noticing, but not giving in to, my mind's frantic and habitual drive to tightly grip (or, paradoxically, to avoid fully taking in) those sweet moments out of the fear of losing them. I know from experience that I will in fact lose them. Somehow, that knowledge helps me to relax.

I know that being a mother means worrying. The potential for shattering loss – the death of one's precious child – is so frightening and real, every day. Our worlds can be – and too frequently are – violently split into before and after – the test result, the phone call, the news report. But I don't want to shut myself off from the greatest love affairs of my life – with my husband and children – out of fear. I do believe that for all of its sorrow and ugliness, the world is also a beautiful and wondrous place, and that love is stronger than death. Moment to moment, I yearn to find and savor what is good and grace-filled. I am deeply grateful to yoga for helping me to stay in the Light.

Benjamin was born healthy and beautiful on January 12, 2002.