

I love being Lifted

Rod Pattenden 7th February 2006

I love being lifted. I can remember at the age of 12, the exquisite sensation of thrusting my chest out into the sky and floating on the sea that first time I was brave enough to get out beyond the breakers. I remember exalting in the thrill of being stretched across the bowl of the horizon watching the seagulls inch their way across my chest wet with sky!

There is nothing like this exquisite grace of letting go, especially when surrounded by a strength and rhythm that responds and matches your own strength. The sea is a good holder of such secret desires. It is able to give this buoyant gift especially if you can keep your mouth shut! But such moments are also found in the fluid scramble of human relations: parents thrusting their children to the sky, friends helping you reach further, and moments of simple ecstatic buoyancy when you are held close.

Recently I celebrated my 50th birthday and in a moment of community inspiration I became airborne across a sea of hands. This unrehearsed celebration even involved a minor crash into furniture that even still re-ignited my lust for lifting out into space, with the added security on this occasion of someone holding onto the seat of my pants.

All this flashed through my body in a heartbeat as I lay on the floor in the middle of the Interplay workshop in Adelaide on Saturday 28th January 2006. I remember the tingling in my limbs and lips, the tunnel vision that narrowed my focus and the lack of panic that slowed down time to measure every second. It was like sinking into an elastic line wavering on some monitor till all that mattered was the slow regularity of my warm breath. Without fear I considered my own dying as a letting go into this gradual stretching out of a rhythm that had measured and sustained my whole life.

Later I would more properly consider the dramatic consequences - for how many people get to die in InterPlay workshops that celebrate the body! Would I be the first? Of course one would like to plan a death to amplify one's best aspirations, or to die doing what one loves best of all. It is a gift, I have decided, that I am uncertain about receiving!

A week of funny slow heart pulse that came and went was teaching me a general wisdom about finding rest, especially as I was able to watch the energy of others without needing to leap up and match it in my usual breathless style. This wisdom prepared me for this sudden moment of letting go into an easy awareness about living and dying. Like drifting on an ocean, there was a definite ambiguity about whether I was floating or sinking. I asked someone whether there was any reason to panic – the answer, if it came, was from a shore too far away – I seemed to be drifting into deeper water and everyone else seemed to be playing in the shallows.

The two big ambulance girls with matching blonde hair were very business like with my body. Before I knew it I was sliding up off the floor on a ramp, being lifted onto the shiny

chrome stretcher and into the ambulance. I regret the lack of lights and sirens, but there was so much to notice in the slow motion nature of the journey.

I remember my companion in this stage of the journey, Trish Watts, being quite still in the emergency ward. Standing, like a solid wooden jetty, as my heart pulse moved up and down. I would slide into each swell and last about 4 minutes before it would bottom out into numbness and nausea and then up again into clear breathing and floating into the sky. Nothing certain, except the coming and going of this strangely floating world.

I guess in all, we float a lot in life – on the shoulders of those we love, those who suffer our insecurities and small blemishes – we see in their faces our capacity for grace and ease as we waddle through the shallows of life. It was not surprising then that small moments of grief should finger their way between breaths. I needed to leave secure an array of small messages of love and assurance –like, tell my children ... and a request that Trish put out the garbage and tidy my desk if I didn't make it home. Not so much about my own death but more about the little connections that love makes for us in the lives of others. I feel embarrassed now thinking about it. Vulnerability turns our belly to the sky.

It was a little shocking to find myself looking both at this sky as well as the sand below my feet. I was clearly contemplating this wavering line of living with no great sense of anxiety but rather with a sense of gratefulness, my eyes wet with this ocean salt.

Sorry - I seem to be drifting - Have I told you that I love being lifted? One day, I guess, I will do it one last time and I have now imagined a coffin painted wild with colour (the artist in me demands a boat sufficient for both life and death) held high by the loveliest hands that have touched me both in my strength and in my weakness.

Sunday was the day of rest in between the shock of crisis and the following surgery to plant in my chest a pacemaker for the rest of my life. I spent most of the day wearing out a box of coloured pencils. In a crisis - make art, a piece of advice that seems to have some wisdom. I made drawings that snap electrically with energy and that look for balance. It gave me pleasure and reminded me that I had choices to make in this situation and that I have a life to be lived even more graciously and buoyantly than I have managed so far.

It is now only a week later, and I am enjoying the full breath capacity of my chest and the resonant energy I can feel in my frame. I am home one day, after a further three days in a Sydney hospital due to an infected hand, but at least I can survey what the ground looks like as I pick up the normal mundane substance we know as life.

I notice that my boundaries of self have shifted. I feel connected to the many rowing hands of a loving community bearing me up through the dark and breaking the surface of my consciousness. I notice I am a little less scared of death and a little more in love with life. The last two weeks have been an aquatic journey that seems surrounded by full-

bodied passionate people at every turn – swimmers of grace, lifeguards and sellers of delicious ice creams, along the shore!

I also notice at this very minute that I am less able to discriminate my feelings into small compartments. It seems most likely that if I see you in the next few weeks that I will rush up and start kissing your fingers. You will know instantly of course that you have been grace for me and that your hands have lifted me when I needed it, even at times when I did not expect it. You see - I just love being lifted!

These moments of lifting provide a great view of the territory both behind and ahead and give the energy for another dive into life. This is great living, unrestrained, buoyant and sometimes risky. There are great secrets to be enjoyed and all you have to do is to keep breathing. - Thank you!

Rod Pattenden is an artist, with Trish Watts is Co-Director of InterPlay Australia, works as Chaplain for the Uniting Church at Macquarie University, and at this point, is happy to be alive.