

After graduating from Syracuse University, I found a job with a summer stock company near Auburn, New York. I was hired for the entire season, so I moved to this city on the edge of the Finger Lakes. That’s where I met Eddie.

Eddie was a full-time resident who made his living as an actor in this small upstate city. He had a way of appearing constantly intrigued and on the point of laughter. Being thirty, He was naturally older and wiser than the rest of us, and so I looked up to him. I mean that figuratively, because Eddie was a very small, wiry guy who lived in a tiny two-story house behind one of the big old Queen Anne homes of Auburn. I needed a place to live, and he rented me a room. His home looked as if it had been intentionally built at $\frac{3}{4}$ scale upstairs and down. It was tidy and compact. I hit my head on door frames and had to bend to go up and down the stairs in order to not graze the stairwell ceiling, which was wall-papered and dinged with the markings of other heads or objects that had miscalculated the height over the decades. It was a fun place to live, when I wasn’t hurting myself.

Eddie practiced a back-to-the-earth kind of diet—he drank non-pasteurized goats’ milk and I never understood what was in his refrigerator. He was, “More Whole Earth Than Thou,” but his self-awareness of his tendency towards piousness saved him. Eddie McDonald carried a tall hiking stick that he carved, and if you made the grade, he asked you to cut your initials on it. I was honored when he asked me to do so before I left at the end of the season and moved to NYC. I suspect and hope that Eddie is one of Auburn’s beloved “town personalities” today.

He would occasionally leave us after a rehearsal, saying that he was “going to go and immerse himself in the meaning of life.” Someday, he said, he would show some of us where to find it.

Upstate New York is full of lakes, big and small. The Finger Lakes are the most notable. But if you hike a ways up a trail, you can easily come across a lake alone in nature with no sign of civilization around it. This is where Eddie took me on a hike through the woods one day. I heard the sound of rushing water, and suddenly we were in a clearing, walking out where the path in the woods ended and a long limestone pad stretched out to a cliff. We walked to the edge and looked down—the water cascaded in a waterfall and dropped an impossible distance into a small, deep, round lake that nestled up against the limestone cliff.

We walked a little more than half way down, where a path led off to a ledge over the lake.

Suddenly, Eddie was pulling off his clothes, dropping them carelessly, and, looking at me with the full awareness of the impact he was creating, he jumped off the edge and plunged into the lake below. I was in full-throttle fear mode. I watched him plunge and disappear for what seemed too long into the depths, and then re-emerge shouting and laughing. He called up for me to jump as well. He told me to jump straight down, and not towards the falls.

I could not. I made my way down the steep side trails until I was at the edge of the lake, and decided that the least I could do was to go for a swim. The water was deep—so deep you could dive down as far as you could where the light so distant rippled from the surface, and never touch a rock or the waving tentacle of a plant. It was as if we were held in a giant bowl of water; a pair of cupped hands in the middle of no-where.

We splashed and swam and laughed. It has been many years, and I have to paraphrase, but Eddie said words to this effect; “I call this ‘Meaning of Life Lake.’ It is really called, ‘Carpenter’s

Falls,' but I call it 'Meaning of Life' so that there is a place where I can be reminded that life should be exhilarating. When you are ready to really experience 'the meaning of life,' let me know." I was at the stage of life where if someone challenged me that way, I might say, "Jump off a cliff? Why surely, I don't see why not! Plummet into a gorge? Don't mind if I do."

I don't remember how the decision was made, or even how I got back up there, but I do remember looking down from the limestone cliff and stepping out into my decision. I remember forming a cannonball and hurtling downwards. I can feel the smack against the water and the plunge down into the darkness accompanied by the fear that I would hit a rock. And then came the exhilarating surfacing, the sunlight, and the need to just yell over and over from the experience of having a complete epiphany about what it means to feel the connection to the spirit of life.

Eddie the Baptist was waiting nearby when I came up, and he laughed so hard it got me laughing. He splashed water at me and I at him, and we were baptized that day in the waters of the Meaning of Life.

Soon after, we made a picnic of it and brought members of the theatre company down to the lake, and though it was an incredible experience for us all on our day off, I don't remember anyone jumping in from above. I have a picture from that day.

(see Ed Vince's video of the falls <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkwH3dNwdI>)

Whenever you are near people at the pool or in the lake, it is interesting to watch how people enter into the water. So many of us just stick our toe in and express our fear about the temperature. We might talk about the practicality or sensibility of entering so soon after we last ate. Then, there's even the wisdom of immersing ourselves fully in the water given this reason or that.

Others waded into it very slowly, raising their arms higher and higher as they go, displaying an odd kind of duality; they look as if their bottom half is fighting to go in while their top half is resisting until the torture is so intense that they have to finally fall into the experience.

How many ways do people come down to the lake of "The Meaning of Life?" We stand by the shore and just dip our toe into no more than the surface of it. Are any of us unafraid to take the full plunge in a healthy, full and vital way?

When Jesus came to the Jordan to declare his desire to be baptized by John, Luke tells the story that the heaven opened up and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove. More than that, a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Theologian Dan Clendenin says that, "Jesus' baptismal compassion for and solidarity with broken people was vividly confirmed by divine affirmation and empowerment. Still wet with water after his cousin had plunged him beneath the Jordan river, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision... The vision and the voice punctuated the baptismal event. They signaled the meaning, the message and the mission of Jesus as he went public after thirty years of invisibility—that by the power of the Spirit within him, he embodied the realm of God that welcomes people without exception or condition."

In Isaiah, the God that creates says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you."

Who are we to be afraid to walk out and plunge without fear into our lives? My former pastor Bill Coffin, once said, "I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap and then you grow wings." We could tap into that courage, unspool the wisdom that is already within us, and wade deep into the waters.

Art historian Sister Wendy Beckett says, "We have a thrifty God that lets nothing that is good within us ever go to waste. The German mystic Meister Eckhart repeats the point: "Become aware of what is in you. Announce it, pronounce it, produce it and give birth to it.

Next door at the Greek Orthodox church, they have a spiritual injunction that implores a person to “become what you are.” This means by virtue of your creation in the image of God and by your baptism, remember your true humanity, remember that your authentic self is inhabited by God and is a holy creation.

You have an assignment and a purpose in life. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “God’s dream is to be not alone but to have humanity as a partner in the drama of continuous creation.” Life is a great adventure in which to plunge ourselves fully—where we are partners with the Godhead, and though our role might be small, the honor is still there.

Essayist Merle Shain says that, “The world needs all of our power and love and energy, and each of us has something to give. The trick is to find it and use it, to find it and give it away, so there will always be more. We can be lights for each other, and through each other’s illumination we will see the way. Each of us is a seed, a silent promise, and it is always spring.”

Grab this new year and make it work. Dive fully into the water and rise in the power of the Spirit that is working right now within you. Embody the realm of God that welcomes people without exception or condition. The strength is there to draw on—our guiding narrative says that we have been called by name to be capable of much more than we can know or imagine. Amen.

Sermon Resource:

“Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life,” Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (Scribner/New York) 1996. I acknowledge the source of some of the quotes I used near the end, which I found clustered on page 509, “You.”

Scripture for Sunday, January 10, 2010

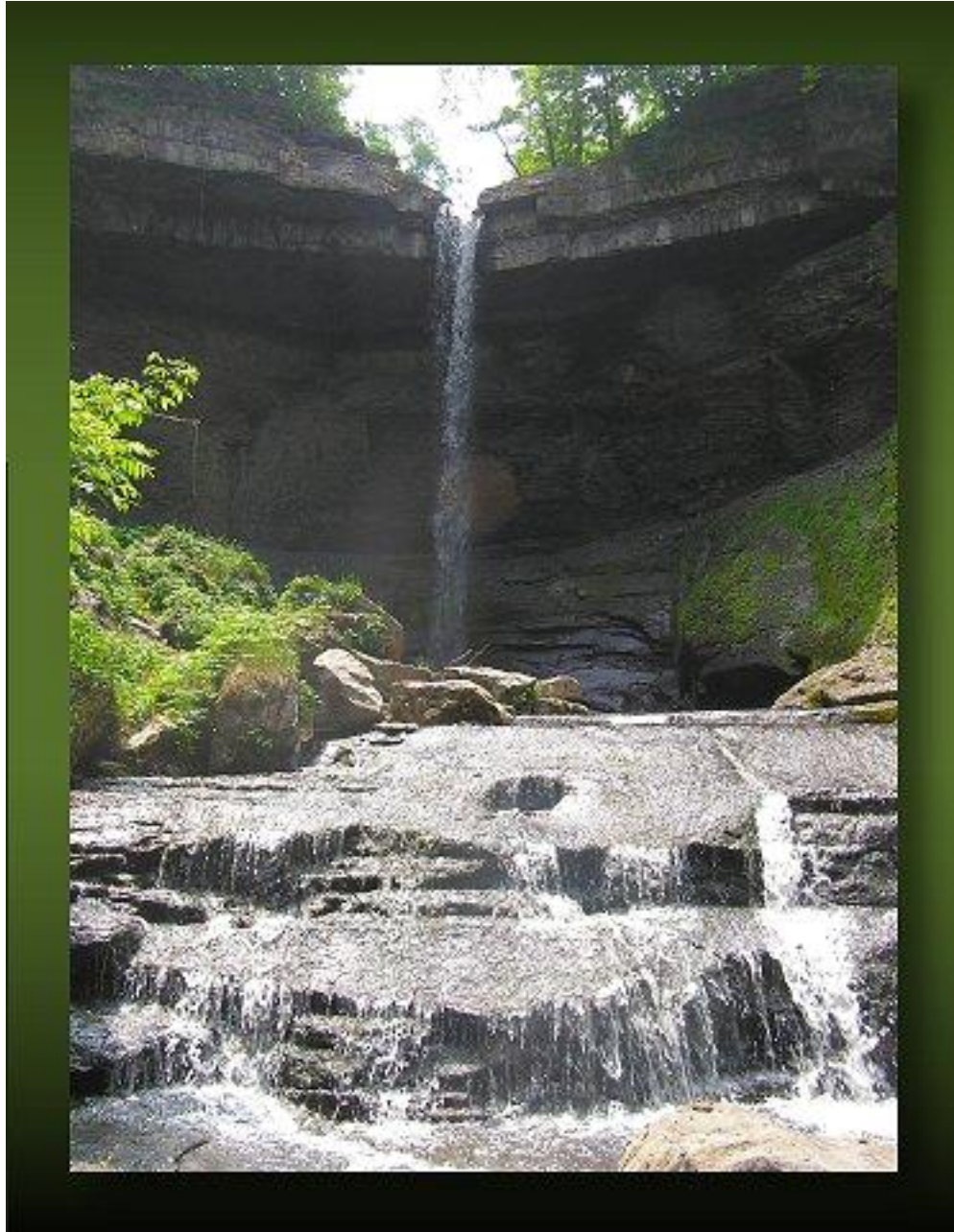
Isaiah 43:1-2

1 But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”



Carpenter Falls is reputed to be a 90' freefall on Bear Swamp Creek, which feeds into Skaneateles Lake, about 1/2 way down the western side of the lake. The actual height may be closer to 70' or 80'. The falls are only visible after a strenuous climb down the steep sides of the gorge, but there is a well-traveled trail to follow. As with Angel Falls below it, these rocks are filled with fossils.