

A Matter of Balance

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More than once in the last few weeks as I thought about the question posed for these reflections — *When has a crisis of faith led to greater faith for you?* — I suspected I might not be qualified to respond. For the truth is, dramatic crises of faith are not part of my experience. But then I would reread, “*One’s devotion to something cannot be truly steadfast until it has withstood moments of doubt.*” “Moments of doubt.” Just moments? I’m well-acquainted with those!

Moment after moment after moment, I waver and wobble around in faith most of the time: now I trust, now I don’t; now I remember, now I don’t; now I will, now I won’t. So goes a continual oscillation between faith and anxiety, recollection and inattention, willingness and resistance. I seek steadfastness, I try to find a still point of balance, but grow tired or frustrated, I am distracted or frightened. I find myself falling away, my focus scattering. Then I have to pray or read or walk or rest my way back to a starting place where I can try again. It’s a balancing act.

Now balance has always been a mystery to me, but twice a week for the past year I have attended a yoga class, and I am finally learning to understand how balance works. I struggled and struggled until I heard someone explain that balance is never static. When we are in balance, our muscles are continually making micro adjustments to keep our joints and bones aligned to carry our weight. So even in alignment, balance is constant motion.

Sometimes we waver almost imperceptibly. Sometimes we wobble right out of a pose and have to begin all over the process of getting into it. Either way, the process of balancing my body gives me insight into the relationship between faith wobbles and steadfastness.

In *The Athlete’s Guide to Yoga*, Sage Rountree writes:

Some principles apply in all balance poses. First, remember your alignment. Learn [the basic] mountain pose well, and let it inform every other posture you take. Next, breathe . . . It seems obvious, but you will find more control in balance poses by remaining aware of your breath and letting it stabilize you. Similarly, find a gazing point to help you steady yourself; . . . Choose something that’s not moving . . . don’t attach your gaze to your own image in a mirror. . . .Keep your supporting leg long but don’t lock out at the knee. You need structural support, but you want access to the micro adjustments of your lower leg.”

Hmph!

Many years ago my husband, two young sons and I boarded the local “ferry” to go from the Caribbean island of St. Maarten to Anguilla. We boarded as the sun was setting — the only tourists among about 30 local businessmen, families with boxes and shopping bags, and one goat. As I remember, the boat was big and high-prowed, with a raised platform in the bow for the pilot. Its sides were very low, no higher than the plain wooden benches we sat on, with a couple of rope lines to keep things in. Darkness fell quickly as we headed out to sea, the wind picked up, and the chop increased. When a wave broke over the side, we moved the boys away from the ropes and searched the blackness ahead for a reassuring light, a sign of land ahead.

In seas now running tall enough to look up at, I listened to the wind and looked into the storm and began to panic. But then I noticed that the other passengers, aside from sheltering children and bracing their feet against the luggage, were relatively relaxed. From time to time one or another would glance up at the pilot in the bow, and then return to eating or singing, nursing a baby or teasing a neighbor. And then I realized that they weren’t looking at the storm; they were focused on the pilot, who was steadily gazing ahead toward the land we couldn’t see, alert but confident and calm. Focused on the pilot and in each others’ company, they were balancing in trust between how it was outside the boat and how it was within.

I hadn’t known a storm like this before, but they had. I could trust their trust. I could breathe, loosen muscles, sit up. My fear subsided. With a steady focus and a community of witness, we rode through the storm to shore.

Living in faith is a lot like that night crossing and a lot like a balancing pose. Passage after passage, through storms on strange seas and tempests in teapots, in floods of exhilarating grace and abysses of loss, on treacherous ground and smooth highways, prepared or taken by surprise, it is possible to make a steadfastly wavering decision to trust, to choose what we will focus on, to breathe and to lean on the witness of companions who travel both before and with us.

I can balance on that.