



05. Motherhood – Drowning in Something Worthy

Reading:

“Up For Air”

(source: <https://designformankind.com/2018/02/losing-yourself/>)

By Erin Loechner

I am often losing myself in things, in seasons, quicker than a phase of the moon. I am able to be swallowed entirely by a single turn of events, or a string of such. Sometimes, all it takes is a song.

Once, as a child, my swim coach pulls me aside after practice, holds the door to the locker room. *Erin, she says. When you're in the water, it's like you're somewhere else. Where do you go?*

I've never found an answer to the question, although it haunts me from time to time.

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My swallowing began in the deep waters of parenting, in the thick responsibility of it all. I wanted to get it right – no, *perfect* – and I wanted to be every good mother I could conjure to mind. No-nonsense and firm, still tolerant of raw emotion. Playful, kind. Up for

anything within good reason. Knowable. Armed with a smile. Comfortable with a mess – whether metaphorical or Legos.

For nearly six years, I have placed high efforts in practicing such. I have put my head down in deep focus, in desperate prayer.

Some days go better than others.

It occurs to me that I haven't come up for air in a while, haven't focused on much else. Haven't trusted there was enough strength in the reserves.

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What do you do when you're drowning in something worthy? When the muchness of it all is suffocating, when you want to come up for air so badly but when you do, your heart beckons you back to the waves? Are your gasps of breath a rescue or an escape?

Is motherhood the water? Or is it the air?

I suppose it depends on the day.

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Yesterday, a friend brings over kombucha and apples. We stir almond butter at the counter, dole out spoonfuls for the kids. Half fruit, then quarter it. Quarter it again. Tinier still, for tiny mouths.

So what's new? we ask each other in different words.

Neither of us have a response – *same old, just doin' the kid thing* – and for a moment, we fall silent in comfortable irony. Months ago, our answer was the same, but the silence far less deafening. Months ago, we were unable to finish the sentence – any sentence.

Months ago, there were only needy babies and fussy cries and bouncing knees, and now, here we are, slicing apples for grown limbs that have just decided to gather their boots and head out to build a snow fort.

It is quiet now, here in the water.

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For what it's worth (and it's worth much): I don't think motherhood is the singular identity in which we dip our toes into the waves only to find the tide soon sweeping in over our heads. Whatever our commitments, the same current runs beneath the surface:

Who am I, apart from this thing over here? Would I recognize myself without it? Would I want to?

We are all human, it seems. Entirely swallowable.

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Last year, I accepted a short-term, part-time consulting project. I'd missed the creative rush of design deadlines and marketing deliverables, ached for the shuttered sense of productivity. The before, the after. The unanimous applause for something other than remembering everyone's favorite flavor of Lara Bar.

I loved the challenge of it, was just giddy over those early morning hours where the little ones were deep in dreams and I was deep in another kind. When the project wrapped two weeks later, a ping in my brain: Is this what it would be like to go back to work? The kids awake, dressed and feeding themselves at the dining room table, toast crumbs and Uno deck where your Pantone swatches were just hours before?

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And yet, full time work stirs up so much murk in the waters – that ambiguous tread of loyalty. It's difficult to devote full efforts to a project and not see 4am cries and requests for duplicate bedtime stories as an inconvenience.

Difficult to offer attention to the baseboards and produce when the contract needs signed.

When you're in the water, it's like you're somewhere else.

I wonder sometimes if this – among primary reasons like necessity and frugality – is why some of our mothers and our mother's mothers took up sewing, gardening, homemaking. Work that might busy her hands but not divide her heart. Interruptable. Something useful to add to her day that wouldn't subtract time with her child.

Air.

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Perhaps this is why I so love writing here every now and then, snapping photos of strewn-about toys and sticky fingers and slept-in braids. It is an undivided heart, my early morning garden – merely something fresh to breathe in when the waters get rough.

Something cool to dive into when, from time to time, the air feels stale.

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Sometimes, when I attempt to explain why I don't scale up and hire help for this space, I think of my own stammered-out reply to my swim coach all those years ago – convictions laced with doubt, a pseudo-apology – and her long-kept words:

Oh honey, don't be sorry. It's not a bad thing. Sometimes losin' yourself looks a lot like findin' yourself – and you know what? I'm not just talkin' water.

This morning, I hear footsteps down the hall, the switch of a bedroom light. I know my kids have woken, earlier than usual, and I begin the process of shutting down my computer, rinsing out coffee grounds, [scrawling plans onto paper](#). Happy to greet a new day. Later, there will be whites to sort and stories to tell. Walks to take. Soups to stir.

Plenty of work to be done, I think, the waters waist-high.

Plenty of air all around.

Reflection & Discussion:

- Do you feel like it is important to have some sort of work outside of your role as mother? What sort of “work” (career or otherwise, hobbies, volunteering, etc.) outside of motherhood or your household are you drawn to (whether you currently participate in it or not)? Does this feel like “air” or “water”?
- Consider the following questions posed by the author: “What do you do when you’re drowning in something worthy? When the muchness of it all is suffocating, when you want to come up for air so badly but when you do, your heart beckons you back to the waves? Are your gasps of breath a rescue or an escape? *Is motherhood the water? Or is it the air?*”
- Have you felt this tension within motherhood, the air and the water, a rescue and an escape? How has motherhood felt lately – like the air or like the water? Are you drowning or finding breath or somewhere in between?
- “Sometimes losing yourself looks a lot like finding yourself”. Do you feel truth in this phrase? Have you experienced this in your own life? What about in relation to motherhood? Are you able to describe in what ways “losing yourself” has actually led to “finding” a truer, more authentic self? Do you find any spiritual connections here?

Journaling Prompt:

- Write “Water” and “Air” on a page. Now begin to list the situations/things/words that come to mind under each heading – notice what in your life right now feels like “water” (struggle) and what feels like “air” (life-giving). Try not to judge. Allow the page to be a safe space to write, even if good things feel hard right now.