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## Finding My Breathing Space

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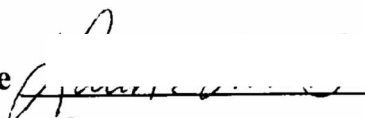
*Finding my Breathing Space*

*Honors Senior Project*  
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## HONORS THESIS

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## *Finding my Breathing Space*

In one of my favorite childhood picture books, a grandfather lives in the middle of the forest in a room nestled among trees. One clear night, he carefully removes a pearl from the wooden chest that rests at the end of his bed. Pearl in hand, he and his dog, whose gossamer white fur matches that of the grandfather's long beard, walk through the deep forest to the edge of the ocean. Every turn of the page, the pearl grows larger in his hand. When he reaches the water's edge, he lifts it into the night sky where it rises and rises until it becomes the moon. After relinquishing his pearl, the grandfather smiles contentedly and returns with his dog to his room in the middle of the forest.

I have a memory that seems to float above all my other experiences—like a pearl moon above the ocean, a memory that is solitary in its mystery and that seems strangely incongruent with my everyday life. I try to understand how it sheds light upon the rest of my experiences, thoughts and beliefs. When I do, sometimes I am standing in its light and other times I am hiding in its shadow. Attempting to make sense of it all, however, is like over-intellectualizing a poem, tainting its simplicity, denting its curves. The overall story is one of grace and acceptance, but what happened on December 12, 2003 is above me. All I can do is, like the grandfather who offers up his pearl, lift up this story as a poem, as a gift.

*I remember the service I attended about a week before the accident. A visiting pastor spoke about missions, a topic that makes most people, including myself, cringe and want to crawl away from anything having to do with a church.*

*BUT, life is a funny thing, and it was from such a sermon that I heard a story that would resurface in my mind about a week later and perhaps play a part in why I am still alive today.*

*The pastor shared about a road trip he and his wife took through the southwest. On a scarcely traveled road in the middle of the desert, his wife fell asleep at the wheel, swerved the car and was thrown out the window. Her husband found himself with his wife's bleeding head in his lap, praying, yelling out to God.*

*In his moment of desperation, he prayed.*

In the winter of 2003, we made our third annual snowshoeing trip to Mt. Baker. During our first adventure freshman year, Greg and I saw the breath-taking views that make Artist Point the popular snowshoeing destination that it is. The sky was glacier-water blue, and not even a thumbprint of a cloud marked the horizon. The following year, the weather was overcast, and our group ended up turning back early. In 2003, we planned to go the weekend after finals before heading home for the Christmas holiday. Greg invited his friend JP along, who had never been snowshoeing. On the morning of December twelfth when it was still dark outside, Greg picked me up in his dusty silver Subaru. The sky began spilling light as we ventured up Mt. Baker Highway, sipping hot drinks and listening to the music that would season the soundtrack of my college years: the Barbed Wire Cutters, a local bluegrass band.

Upon reaching the upper parking lot of the ski area, it was snowing wet snow. The weather was less than ideal, but a bit of precipitation hadn't prevented any of us from going on a little hike before. We strapped on our snowshoes and started on the route we had taken before and that hundreds of others travel every year.

When the trail up to Artist Point narrowed, the snow got deeper. Greg, JP and I took turns punching footsteps as we continued to follow the rough outline of what is a road during the summer months. On outdoor adventures, when circumstances become trying, I tend to laugh a lot. We were making the best of the day, laughing at ourselves and occasionally falling into the snow, just like kids do.

Less than two hours had passed when two skiers met us on their way down and suggested we not go much further. I don't recall them mentioning avalanche danger, only inclement weather. We had no trouble convincing ourselves to head back; we figured we'd just make it over a near hummock, have lunch and turn around.

We had barely started traversing a hillside single-file when, without any warning, we saw a wave of snow descending towards us. Our mouths opened to yell, but only syllables made the journey from our tongues and teeth into air.

Had I known a lot about avalanches or even been thinking about the possibility of a slide, I probably would have panicked much more than I did. I can't remember my first

thought, but I know it wasn't avalanche. I was under the impression that I would just dig myself out and be fine. When I began to panic, however, was when I tried to push against the snow and found I could not move. That feeling was like trying to use a leg press at the gym but with too much weight; I could not push back.

My thoughts catapulted forward faster than I could take them seriously: *I might not be home with my family for Christmas. I might not be home with my family for Christmas. This could be it. I could die.* The core of me could not accept the possibility. I was incredulous.

The only thing I remembered about avalanche safety was a diagram I saw once of a figure extending one hand up through the snow while using the other hand to create a breathing space. I could not move my arms, so I tried to take bigger breaths to melt the snow from around my face. I didn't know then that statistically people don't survive more than 15 minutes under avalanche debris. Breaths condense and freeze against the walls around a person's head, causing a person to die of lack of oxygen or carbon dioxide poisoning, whichever happens first.

My body was lodged in the snow, but my mind was stuck on the story I had heard a week before. *In that man's moment of desperation, he prayed.* And so I prayed. I don't remember making a specific request or saying words out loud; I think I was simply allowing space for Jesus to come in. What I recall next--my most distinct memory of the day--is the feeling of peace that I would get out alive.

I don't remember being conscious more than five to ten minutes of the twenty four hours I spent under the snow. Then two skiers, two of the people to whom I owe my life, punched with probes through the air pocket that gave me remnants of breath. As one of these men, Aaron, held me to keep me warm, he started to pray out loud for me. After he started praying, he told me I joined him and that I kept repeating, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Since the accident, I've been privileged to meet some of the people who were involved in the rescue. What follows are some of the details they have given me.

Aaron loves the mountains. He respects the mountains. And he knows Mt. Baker well. Every day he can, Aaron goes skiing and when he does, he tracks the weather and

snow conditions in a notebook. Aware of the high avalanche danger on Saturday, which had been steadily increasing since a high wind event a few days prior, he and his friend Barrett knew where to ski to avoid the more dangerous slopes. It was the morning of the thirteenth, and a strong northeast wind was blowing, a wind that happened to carry Greg's shouts for help more than a quarter of a mile to where he and Barrett were. Aaron and Barrett hurried to meet Greg, for whom it had taken the entire previous night, through cold and snow, to free himself from his snowshoes, dig out and cry for help.

After Greg convinced ski patrollers that yes, a day had passed since the slide, JP and I seemed like lost causes. Upon hearing Greg's story, the ski manager assumed JP and I were dead. The chances that we would have survived over night were next to nothing, and the conditions were still too dangerous for the ski manager to send one of his search crews. Aaron knew then that if there were any possibility of survivors, he and Barrett were the only ones who could help. Despite the ski manager's insistent disapproval, Aaron decided to head back with Barrett and risk going to the location Greg described.

They probed the area with ski poles, uncovering JP's body first. Then they found me under about two to three feet of snow. When they punched through my air pocket, Aaron said I called out, "I'm under here!"

About this time another group of skiers were nearby: Lynn, her dog Sancho, her friend Beth and Beth's boyfriend Wade. The ski patrol warned them of high avalanche danger and the possible burial of two people on the trail to Artist Point. Their plan, then, became similar to Aaron and Barrett's; they would stay to the less avalanche-prone areas. Soon, however, Wade heard someone yelling that another avalanche survivor had been found and help was needed. Lynn and Beth told a passing skier to relay the information to a chair lift operator and continued trudging, as quickly as they could through the deep snow, past the point which Lynn said she would have otherwise considered a safe turn-around spot. Then they came across a gathering of people at a curve in the trail.

Lynn saw me positioned across Aaron's lap. Sancho moved to lie down next to me to keep me warm, and Beth and Lynn positioned their packs to add insulation. Aaron



gave me water and hot soup, and Beth and Lynn rubbed my body and tried to shield Aaron and me from the snow that was still coming down.

It was about noon or 12:30 on Saturday when Lynn and her friends reached the site, and it wasn't until 2 o'clock that a Snowcat arrived. While Lynn, Beth and Sancho piled into the front of the Snowcat, Aaron and some others rode in the back with me down the hill.

My first memory is lying on a table in a room in the Mt. Baker ski lodge and of the many faces gathered around me. I remember bright lights and the shine of wood and something the color green. I briefly recall someone cutting off my boots and my waterproof and fleece pants. A smiling woman's face was in front of me, and she was talking, trying to keep me alert.

My next memory is of riding in the ambulance. It was dark in the back of the cab. The straps keeping my legs secure felt awkward and uncomfortable, and I felt a pull in my left thigh. I remember sheepishly asking the two medics sitting with me, as if it were a bothersome request, if my leg could be readjusted. The medics smiled, as if they knew something that I didn't, and were quick to attend to whatever I needed.

Once I reached the hospital, I drifted in and out of consciousness. I remember periodically feeling hot and irritated from the warming blankets placed around my legs.

That I hadn't returned Friday evening didn't worry my roommates; they figured I must have spent the night at Greg's place. When they called his brother on Saturday and found out we weren't at Greg's place, their concern became real. They called Mt. Baker to see if any accidents had occurred but none had been reported yet. My roommate Tiana, who was an emergency room technician, went to St. Joseph's Hospital and broke rules checking records for possible red flags. She wasn't in the building longer than an hour when she heard news that one woman was coming in from the mountain and that another woman in the party hadn't made it.

When she saw my face poking out from the mummy wrapping in which I arrived, she told me I was magical. When I rolled my eyes at her, she knew I was all right.

About two years after the accident I had lunch with Dr. Chao-Ying Wu, the physician on duty that day on the mountain. From the time I was found and throughout my hospital stay, he noticed my sense of humor. I confused him, he said. Having arrived at the lodge, I showed no obvious signs of frostbite. Also, most people with a core body temperature of 88 degrees aren't conscious, and although I don't remember being unburied, I was able to talk when found and was good-humored when receiving care.

I couldn't grasp what people told me: it was Saturday and that twenty four hours had passed. I was acting as if I had just woken up from a nap that lasted longer than I had intended. "Well, shoot," I seemed to be thinking, "I need some food." I didn't feel hungry, but because I was underweight at this time, I approached the need to eat with a sense of urgency. When the nurses told me eating wouldn't be a good idea, I insisted they bring me something, as if they just didn't understand. After realizing that a dose of Jello-like substance wouldn't go down, I finally believed them. They also had to convince me that, for heavens-sakes-child, don't worry about the snowshoes; I was concerned that I had lost my friend's snowshoes and wouldn't she be mad.

The speed with which my family arrived seemed odd to me, as well; there they were, scrunched up against the hospital curtain: my mother, father and my two brothers, one of whom had made it all the way up from Portland. I remember saying, especially to Craig, "Man, you really didn't have to come all the way up here...I'm doing just fine." Even though I seemed to be recovering well—my fingers and toes, which had been black and blue, were returning to pink and I had no signs of brain or spinal injury--they still worried, of course, but stayed strong. I am extremely grateful that they were graced with innocence regarding my unknown whereabouts the day before.

Occasionally the hubbub around my bed would calm down, and there was a moment when only Tiana was in the room with me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a news broadcast about an accident at Mt. Baker. At this point I had begun to understand what had happened to me but was still unclear about Greg and JP. Nobody had divulged the complete story for fear that I would go into shock. When I asked Tiana where JP was, however, she could not answer but with the truth: "Laurie, J.P. didn't make it." *That* was when I realized the gravity of my situation. I didn't know how to respond. It would take me a long time to let those feelings sink in.

A day passed before I saw Greg. After receiving medical attention at the mountain, he was released to go home with his brother. When Greg came to the hospital the next day to get his face and finger frostbite checked and his knee X-rayed, nurses brought him to see me in a wheelchair. I have never seen a face, which was scratched black and blue, filled with a grief that felt so close. After freeing himself from the snow, I can't imagine the sadness and guilt that weighed him down. He recalls hearing yelling, perhaps from JP, which stopped in the middle of the night, and he could do nothing to help. In his wheelchair, he came over next to me, we held hands, and he told me quietly, struggling to make words, "I'm so glad you're alive." I didn't know what to say; I just nodded and squeezed his hand.

Many people called, sent flowers and came to visit my hospital room. I was so overwhelmed by the amount of love and concern that was coming my way I didn't know what to do with it. To worried voices and to grateful ones, I remember laughing a lot. I remember Sarah in her tan trench coat and Kyle, two of my roommates, stopping by. Sarah brought one of her favorite Dr. Seuss books, and the two of them delivered a personalized emergency ration to Tiana who had spent the night in the hospital: a loaf of bread, Wisconsin cheese, a quart of orange juice and a bar of good chocolate. I remember that my friend Derek got a substitute for his high school class and drove up from Tacoma to spend the night. I remember receiving calls from high school classmates and from my high school secretary, a co-worker and old friends. I remember my English professor coming to visit and bringing flowers. I remember my sister-in-law relaying to me over the phone what my three-year old nephew Garrett inquired: "Is Auntie Laurie still stuck in the snow? There were wild animals all around her who went, 'Owhoooo!'" (He asked me later, "Are you telling Jesus not to bring the storm any more?") I remember my brother Sean's frequent expressions of concern that I hadn't been treated correctly for frostbite and wouldn't my toes fall off. Then I remember telling him that he didn't dare go anywhere but Goodwill to buy an oversized pair of shoes to fit the brace that I would have to wear. I also remember the friendly nurses waking me up periodically to give me medication with Saltine crackers and the nurses who watched upon telling me to use a portable toilet they wheeled next to my bed. (Talk about stage fright.) And although the

hospital food could have been better at times, I enjoyed having meals brought to me in bed on a tray, covered with a lid. Oh, what suspense! Oh, the little joys!

The hospital sent me home with a walker, and although I may have looked like a person who would need one: a slightly disheveled woman wearing a light yellow fleece robe, a foot brace and cheap, periwinkle, practically plastic sneakers from Payless, I wasn't planning on using it much. I could walk slowly wearing a brace, which I wore to correct the foot-drop that resulted from peroneal nerve damage in my left leg, a condition that would heal over the next few months. I'll remember fondly my father getting an absolute kick out of discovering that a toy we had stashed in a closet at home represented remarkably well the way I moved around without the brace. The toy consisted of a wooden duck at the end of a long pole, and when pushed along like a lawnmower, the duck's rubber feet would flap against the hardwood floor.

Although by the first of the quarter, I was trudging to school through the snow sludge and wearing my brace, the time home between the accident and the start of classes was when my feet hurt the most. There was a period of time where I crawled to get around because of the tingly pain. My feet felt as if they had been tightly wrapped and were slowly becoming unbound. My emotions were becoming unbound, as well.

Many people were attributing my survival to God, and because this seemed to be the easy answer, I resisted it and tried different explanations on for fit, as well. Wearing my no-God pants, I say God had nothing to do with it--or anything else in my life for that matter. What if my experience was a complete fluke? I just happened to fall into an air pocket. Period. It was my physical circumstances, I say, and nothing else that explains why I am here today: the position of my body, the clothes I was wearing, my age, the way the states of panic versus non-panic affect the body's ability to function, the availability of oxygen and its content in the snow.

Certainly these factors played a large part in my survival. I cannot deny, however, that *something* else was going on. For example, I have never experienced prayer in the way I did that day: a prayer that came *to* me from outside of myself; it went over me, under me, through me. I was suspended on it, as if on a wave, being held up by a

shoulder of energy that kept me afloat. The memory about the pastor came *to* me; I did not shuffle through my mind trying to find the story that would bring me peace. I also had no control over how Aaron prayed for the three of us, and I cannot claim to have consciously formed the words that came out of my mouth in response to him. The prayer factor seems just as real as air pockets--spirit oxygen, perhaps.

Then there is what I will call the grace factor. It did not take long for me to realize that I did *absolutely nothing* to be here. No work whatsoever. Under the snow, I quickly became unconscious, having no conscious control over whether I would live or die. My body went into survival mode, decreasing its metabolism and need for oxygen. I don't remember prolonged periods of panic, and I don't even remember being cold, despite being hypothermic. When I bring my attention to my left foot, I can tell it is weaker than my right, but besides that, I have fully recovered physically. I didn't have to earn my life or bargain for it; it was simply given to me, no strings attached. My life is a complete gift. Perhaps I was living a metaphor of grace.

Other grace-full reminders kept coming my way, as well. It was as if little notes were being dropped into my life like messages on napkins tucked into lunch boxes. Upon coming home from the hospital, I remember reading the following passage:

*While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?"*

*Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe."*

*He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.*

*After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!")*

*Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.*

*Mark 5:35-43*



In my case and in the preceding story, the reactions from bystanders are similar. Both illustrate the same initial assumption from others: the women are dead. To consider otherwise would have been foolish. Someone else, however, resists their conclusion and behaves in an arguably unreasonable way. “Don’t be afraid; just believe,” Jesus said. Perhaps this spirit was in Aaron that day. Although he must have been afraid, I believe he was riding on faith more than fear that day. Maybe the same spirit was active within me, too. I didn’t say, “Ok, Laurie, don’t be afraid; just believe,” but it seems as if this was what I did, possibly on a subconscious level. Certainly some of my time was spent in fear. The other half of the imperative, though, or the “just believe” clause, seemed to kick in soon after. Then Jesus goes to the daughter and proclaims, to the others’ disbelief, “The child is not dead but asleep.” The daughter in the story was asleep; I was unconscious. And then Jesus takes the girl by the hand and tells her to get up. Having received the invitation, the little girl stood up. It didn’t take me long either to become alert and responsive to the bewilderment of those around. Lastly, Jesus did not want to make a big fuss out of the situation. He wasn’t eager to bring attention to himself, the girl or to the sequence of events. Rather than emphasizing what did happen, Jesus seemed to be more interested in what *can* happen. He simply encouraged that the girl’s basic needs be attended to and for everyone to return to their lives.

I was also in the habit of reading a poem a day during this time, and one morning I read a poem by Robert Hass that began:

*Our Lady of the Snows*

*In white,  
the unpainted statue of the young girl  
on the side altar  
made the quality of mercy seem scrupulous and calm.*

Not only did the title stand out but its mention of mercy and calm resonated with my experience, as well.

In the two years since the accident, I have realized that while the spiritual aspects to my experience seem untouchable, simple and pure, wrestling with how I respond

presents a much more muddled situation. A misunderstanding existed between what I thought and what I thought others thought, and there was an incongruity between how I was responding to the experience and how I thought I should or how I wanted to respond. The space between these expectations and reality is the field upon which I've been searching for acceptance. I've been learning to embrace the ways the experience has both deepened and confused my current emotional, physical and spiritual life.

When opportunities, inclinations or invitations to tell my story arose was when I realized that sharing my experience authentically would mean expressing the untouchable and the tangled, the simple and the complex, the pure and the mess. Winter quarter I took a small seminar class, which was organized around the theme of defining the self. The professor asked if I'd be willing to talk about my experience in this light. I agreed because I thought speaking might be good for me, but parts of me were kicking no. As I reflected on what I might say I felt rather ashamed. I assumed that what my classmates wanted to hear or expected to hear was the testimony of a changed woman. To be honest, I was tempted to apologize. *Sorry, guys. I just don't feel like I've changed. I remember so little of what happened. I mean, really, I was only conscious for ten minutes. All I know is what people tell me; I carry around their words and their interpretations like borrowed books.* Even though I told myself that whatever I said would be fine, when I actually opened my mouth in front of my peers, feelings of disappointment and not-good-enough lingered in my throat and tears gathered in armies. I began to see differences between what I assumed people wanted to hear and what I needed to say.

People were calling me a miracle, but I didn't feel like one. I didn't even know if I wanted to be called one. Until recently, I was uncomfortable and repulsed by the ease with which the word was being tossed around like potatoes in regards to my experience. First of all, the word reminded me of Hallmark cards, and I hate Hallmark cards. They often seem packaged, trite and garish, and from a hard-liner's perspective, the easy way out. The word also irked me for the angelic connotations that followed closely behind. Since elementary school, I had been trying to dissolve from my forehead a goody-goody label, which I hated because it boxed me off from other people. Any association with being better-than, chosen, angelic, or miraculous, then, made me want to scream, for such labels put me in the same box that I had been trying to break down for years. Stomping

on this box's walls with both feet, I wanted to say, "Stop. I am just like one of you, no better and no worse!"

When I was receiving nudges of better-than from others, I was giving less-than messages to myself, all the while realizing that neither place was where I wanted to be. I attended JP's memorial service and watched her friends as they bravely donned hot pink arm bands to commemorate JP's life. Looking at them, I felt distant, and although I recognized many of her friends, I think very few of them realized who I was. From what I had heard about JP, I was convinced that she brought more joy to her friends and family than I did to mine and that she would have been a greater asset to this world than me. Yikes! But these were the thoughts running through my head. That it would take time to truly accept and celebrate myself and my experience for what it is and has become became clear. By learning acceptance and celebration, I could honor J.P. I needed to communicate my story truthfully, but I didn't know how, when or to whom.

Almost two years passed before I considered writing about my avalanche experience. Again, I recoiled from the idea because quite frankly, I still didn't know what to think. I wasn't sure how to represent the emotional, physical and spiritual sides of me, the stories beneath the stories. I was wary of engaging in a me-me-me mode. What helped me overcome my hesitation, however, were a professor's words: "Maybe this experience isn't about you." Wow. When I recognized that my words wouldn't only be for me but even more so for my family, friends and perhaps strangers, I was given a new frame within which to work. My story could be a gift. The time had come to give my pearl away and perhaps by doing so, let it grow into something larger than what I could hold in the palm of my hand.

About three months ago I met Aaron, the man who risked his life for JP and me, who dug us out and cared for me until help arrived. Until I met Aaron, I didn't know anything else about him besides his name. A friend Michael, and unbeknownst to me, a friend of Aaron's too, took me to Graham's restaurant in Glacier where Aaron works as a cook. It was about 4:00, the sun was just beginning to settle down for the night, and no customers were in the restaurant yet. Michael went into the kitchen and told Aaron that he wanted to introduce him to someone. When Aaron came around the corner, we immediately gave each other big hugs. As we got situated--Aaron on the corner of an old

piano, one foot resting on the piano bench, and Michael and I sitting on a picnic-like table facing him—the energy between us felt big and important. Slowly, he began to re-live that day and tell what he remembered. “I don’t know where you’re at, but my faith increased ten-fold that day,” he said. I looked at him, having heard something I didn’t expect at all, and smiled knowing that I was part of something much bigger, bigger than I could understand. I welcomed the tears that came. “That day was a miracle,” he said.

Even though I showed resistance initially, today I consider Greg, JP and my experience a miracle. My definition of miracles was simply too narrow before. By expanding its meaning to become broader and free of assumptions and expectations, I am free to celebrate both the ordinary and the extraordinary of my experience, both which can be miraculous depending on one’s perspective. Yes, if miracles were a color, I think I would use it to paint my experience. But I’m also convinced that a spider web or the smell of dirt, a child’s imagination, poetry or even the way gasoline makes rainbows on concrete is colored with miracle, as well. I’ve found the following poem represents my new way of perceiving the word and its meaning:

*Miracle Fair*

*The commonplace miracle:  
that so many common miracles take place.*

*The usual miracle:  
invisible dogs barking  
in the dead of night.*

*One of many miracles:  
a small and airy cloud  
is able to upstage the massive moon.*

*Several miracles in one:  
an alder is reflected in the water  
and is reversed from left to right  
and grows from crown to root  
and never hits bottom though the water isn’t deep.*

*A run-of-the-mill miracle:  
winds mild to moderate  
turning gusty in storms.*

*A miracle in the first place:  
cows will be cows.*

*A miracle minus top hat and tails:  
fluttering white doves.*

*A miracle (what else can you call it):  
the sun rose today at three fourteen a.m.  
and will set tonight at one past eight.*

*A miracle that's lost on us:  
the hand actually has fewer than six fingers  
but still it's got more than four.*

*A miracle, just take a look around:  
the inescapable earth.*

*An extra miracle, extra and ordinary:  
the unthinkable  
can be thought.*

*Wisława Szymborska*

This poem illustrates that we are always surrounded by miracles and the who-would-have-thought. The miracle which I experienced may simply have been a more conspicuous one. What is important to remember, though, is that miracles *can* happen and do.

That our bodies and spirits are connected is an example of an every day miracle. My experience was one of body and of spirit, and telling the story, or any story, without one or the other would be untrue. My spirit needs my body to survive and to thrive; my body needs my spirit to survive and to thrive. In fact, a friend of mine said that the body exists so the spirit can learn. What has my spirit learned throughout this process? My spirit learned to be reverent towards the mysterious. My spirit learned that she can pray without conscious effort. My spirit learned surrender. My spirit is learning to wait. My spirit is learning that she is intimately connected with an amazing body that is strong, resilient and wants to house my spirit and keep her well. I want these lessons to stay with me always.

When tears come about my experience today, one of three emotions usually emerges. First, joy; I am overwhelmed with awe and gratitude for life and the people that allowed me to be here. Two, sadness; I mourn for J.P., her family and her friends. And three, frustration and guilt; *I want my avalanche experience to be more of a daily part of how I process my world and treat myself. Based on what I know happened, I feel I should be more joyful and more alive than I often feel. I want to know to my core and live and*



*express the grace and wonder of my experience rather than just acknowledge that it happened. Sometimes I feel like an impermeable surface; that other wars going on inside me prevent grace from seeping in.*

My prayer, then, is that I will be freed from the walls that keep me buried and unconscious in this life. Life was chosen for me on that day. May I now choose life.

May I approach myself, my choices and my experiences with the same sense of humor that arose naturally that day, with no effort. May I be easier on myself. I did nothing, and I am worthy of a full and restored life. May I take myself lightly, no matter what happens or how.

May I practice the power of prayer and peace. May I learn inner and outer calm. May I learn the ability to make easy, deliberate choices in all things, focusing on what I want instead of what I don't want. May I learn to breathe easily and deeply: to breathe and to pray and be taken away and brought back laughing.

May I believe what Symborska reminds me: the extra and the ordinary: what I once considered to be the unthinkable can be thought. I am worth it because a power outside of myself reminded me so. An example of grace was given to me. May I now show this grace to myself and those around me using the power that is in me and outside me: learning to love myself as I am and allowing myself the freedom to grow into each new experience, letting go of the thoughts and things that no longer serve; and lovingly accepting others just the way they are. May I learn to joyously participate fully in my life.

I am not dead but alive.