Doing Somersaults **[1]**

December 14, 2015 Writing and Faith [2]
Illness [3]

Theme Essay by Laura J. Wolfe

Faith in Words Below the Surface



I learned early on that words are powerful. The old adage of “sticks and stones may break your bones but words will never hurt you” is not true. My father could wield words like a whip, spinning them above our heads, lashing them into our bodies and cutting down to the marrow.

Words have the power to bless or curse, whether they’re spoken, written, or thought. Over the years, as a trained counselor, I have met many clients who’ve been injured or broken somewhere deep inside by words. *You are bad. Unworthy. Stupid. Unlovable.* Such words have settled in and become part of who they perceive themselves to be. The

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distortion is like looking into a fun house mirror and accepting the skewed reflection as reality.

It's also true that writing has been one of the most powerful tools I've used for initiating a different conversation with myself. And yet, I didn't understand the nature of this conversation until faced with a crisis of my own. I've since realized that even a trained therapist can fail at listening—*really listening*—to herself. The trick is to get past the words on the surface, the ones that keep me scared and flailing.

Two years ago, my doctor said, "You have stage IV cancer." I cried, yelled, felt angry, painted, cried some more, grew quiet, and started to write. In the middle of the night, I would reach over to the nightstand beside my bed, pick up my phone, and search for my OneNote app. I'd write about my fears and disappointments. I'd write because I didn't know what else to do with the restless energy I felt from the chemo, the needles, the medications, the surgeries, the pain.

I wrote to question and doubt the compassionate God I had read about for decades in the Bible and whom I'd grown up believing was for me, not against me.

You abandoned me, didn't you? All the claims about loving me, that You'd always protect me. You lied, God.

As a practicing Christian, I knew none of this was fair or spiritually helpful, but for awhile, I felt profoundly betrayed. I knew God encouraged me to grapple, but this had turned into a spiritual free fall. Through writing, I gave myself permission to wrestle with my mortality. Yet, the most surprising gift came when I stopped to listen.

With my clients, I thought my listening skills were good, but during this terrible time, I soon discovered I'd stopped cupping my ear to hear the whispers and shouts of my own soul. Some words had become sediment in the bottom of my life, weighing me down. *You'll never be good enough. You're too much. You're too sensitive.*

Sifting through what I would like to keep, discard, or burn allowed me to enter an internal space, perhaps even a sacred space, where I've found a clearer reflection of myself. On those long sleepless nights, I wrote to express not only anger but gratitude. I wrote to fight back. As I externalized words on paper with pen or listened to my fingers tapping on my phone, I experienced a shift in meaning that may have been hiding inside for decades.

The process of writing is now a way to release my expectations. I no longer focus on controlling outcomes. I open my hands and wait silently for the words to begin.

First, they're a slow trickle, then like a tide, sometimes high, sometimes low. The words come, as life, and journey where they are most needed. It can be uncomfortable, like stepping into the shower when the water isn't quite warm enough. At other times, the words gush forth like a waterfall, and my cupped hands have difficulty keeping up; they pour out to fill the page. When the words are too raw, I have to stop and inhale deeply or walk away for a time. But when I return, I try to listen to the shifting rhythms instead of forcing a need for closure on them.

Recently, at the age of 49, I asked my husband if he could teach me to do somersaults in the pool. He's a patient man. Dipping my head into the water, multiple times, I tried to roll. Each time my head dipped deeper into the water, I found myself struggling with fear, frustrated.

But I don't give up easily. I was determined to find a way through. After about twenty attempts, I bent my head forward, tucking my knees to my chest and extending my arms out to the sides.

It was the most beautiful feeling—floating freely in a complete circle.

I imagine it's this way with writing. The tension between the words I force and those that just bubble up is something I don't pretend to understand. Yet, when I choose to let go, the magic happens. Words that first hung inside, waiting, spin softly to the surface, offering me freedom as I listen, breathe—and write.

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Art Information

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Laura J. Wolfe is an Illinois writer, artist, and counselor. Both her writing and art are sacred spaces where she encounters God, faith, and the courage to journey on. She believes in the power of “showing up.” Laura’s work has been published in *Tiferet Journal, 30 Poems in 30 Days: Writing Prompts and Poems from Tiferet Journal*, and *When Women Waken.*

Her artwork and poetry may be found at Laura J. Wolfe’s website [5]. If you're interested in working with Laura, you’ll find more information at Laura J. Wolfe Counseling, Ltd [6].

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