



Compassion May Require Scuba Gear

2.21.07 by Ginger Geyer

Article:

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© 1997 Ginger Henry Geyer
glazed porcelain with acrylic wash, 4" x 15 1/2" x 21"

In making art, I have learned that excellence is doing the very best I can and allowing God to kick in the rest. The sculpture I create is in the tradition of "*trompe l'oeil*," a perfectionism that fools the eye. My work, however, never quite reaches that standard because porcelain clay is a medium with predictable limitations. It dries quickly into a very fragile greenware, blows up in the bisque firing if there is any air bubble, and always shrinks twenty percent in its high firing. That forces any little unforeseen flaw into a crack, sometimes a gaping crevice. It also alters the glaze colors significantly. Porcelain has taught me that excellence does not equal perfection. What it does require is cooperation and imagination. I learned long ago to listen for the Spirit's movement within the imperfections, and to work with them, for that is where meaning resides.

A piece made ten years ago continues to bug me, so I know it's got something going for it. It is a porcelain life jacket bearing an image of Jesus Walking on the Water. It is my attempt to understand the story from [Matthew 14:22-33](#).



You can read about the sculpture on [my website](#), but even the story there doesn't tell how the sculpture came about. The title of the piece came from a phrase I'd jotted down in 1991 at a Laity Lodge retreat with Madeleine L'Engle. She had spoken about the struggles to embody compassion, a word which literally means "suffering with." We are too scared to dive deep, we fear we are ill-equipped, and moreover, what we really want to preserve is our lifestyle. Madeleine asked us to write a one sentence prayer on how unqualified we all are for what God asks us to do. Musing about the Spirit as breath, I wrote, "When we just can't go deep enough to have compassion, provide us, O God, with scuba gear."

The life jacket explores Matthew's version of the storm at sea, the only one where Peter, that most delightfully cheeky disciple, gets out of the boat. Here we see Peter and Jesus in my adaptation of a 17th century engraving. It helped me reinterpret the story as not so much a failure of faith on Peter's part, but a necessary dunking into compassion.

After weeks of detail work both in the clay and in the glazing, the piece cracked in the final firing. This was upsetting. In my journal I noted, "Lifejacket cracked in three places, like stigmata. I had such high hopes for this one...get out the epoxy. The cracks show it isn't really a lifejacket; it won't float. It takes on water while Jesus walks on water." Even repaired, it would fail the David Letterman "Will it Float?" test.



In any profession, perfection is a trap. In my work, it can rob art of that wild little intuitive thing that bears transcendence. Striving for perfection can energize us, but it can also fool us into equating our worth with our accomplishments. In [Matthew 5:48](#), we read "Be ye perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Misconstruing that word, "perfect" has probably spawned more Christian neurosis than any other scripture. The Greek translation is *teleios*—to realize the purpose for which you were created. Completeness, wholeness, and authenticity are gained not by setting them up as a target. Instead, they are the result of true acts of compassion. Allowing the life jacket to exist in a very flawed state was a small act of compassion—to myself.

In the decade since making the lifejacket, I've continued to keep notes on it. It has been appropriated by [my Chlora character](#) who wonders if Jonah hollered for a lifejacket when he got thrown overboard. Chlora shows us how to get off the surface, hold our nose and jump. Discovering more scriptures and quotes that enhance the story tell me that the piece has allowed some excellence to seep in after all.

The life jacket is restored, and though its cracks show, it is whole. It reminds me that the resurrection did not erase Jesus' scars.

Some Scripture and quotations to think about:

- "God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of his purposes. You don't find it lying around on the surface....The Spirit, not content to flit around on the surface, dives into the depths of God, and brings out what God planned all along." ([1 Corinthians 2: 10](#), from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*)
- "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me." ([Psalm 69: 1-2](#), Harper Collins Study Bible)
- "Is it possible that despite discoveries and progress, despite culture, religion and world-wisdom, one has remained on the surface of life?" (Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*)
- "The mission of art is to teach us to see reality in a new light, to evoke a new sense of what lies beneath the surface appearance of things." (George Inness)
- "The deepest mystery about me is that I can find God in the depths of myself, and having done so, I am then enabled to find him anywhere." (Michael Mayne, *This Sunrise of Wonder*)
- [Compassion] "begins with presence, for it flows out of being present to the plight of others." (Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew*)
- "None of us can survive if we look down at the waves in which we are walking. Jesus calls us to look up and forward to him. In the midst of all storms he is the quiet presence." (Henri Nouwen, *Returning*)
- "When we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness....Compassion is the fundamental religious experience; without it you have nothing." (Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*)
- "The only way God's work will get done is by getting out of the boat. He calls us into the storm; he is Lord of the storm. Therefore, we won't drown because it is not all up to us." (Roger Paynter, sermon 7/9/06)
- "What Peter needed was a couple of steps on the water (to cure his doubt) and then a nose full of sea water (to cure his pomposity)." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Bread of Angels*)
- "'Be ye perfect! Be God-like!' The question is, which 'God' would we choose to imitate? The one whose 'perfection' is revealed in brokenness, availability, and self-giving love? God's perfection is very strange in the world's terms." (Alan Jones, *Soul-Making*)
- "Perfection puts you in the way of the work....God doesn't ask us to be perfect, but to be to be human...to be real." (Madeleine L'Engle, *Sold into Egypt*)