



## **At Ease**

by Tim Bascom

I have a vague memory of curling up in the carpeted footwell of a car when I was only three or four, back in the days before seat belt laws. I think I fell asleep down there with the warm purr of the engine, oblivious to the problems of the outer world, problems that were for adults to resolve, not me. And later, when I was on family vacations as a ten- or eleven-year old, I clearly remember getting tired of sitting between my two sweaty brothers then throwing my chubby pre-pubescent body over the back seat into the luggage area of our Rambler station wagon, where I sprawled across the duffle bag that held our canvas tent and across the flannel sleeping bags. The Rambler swayed and rumbled. I could see out the rear window to the stars, which glittered in the immense sky, flickering as we passed under silhouetted trees. And I dozed off without thought or worry. Limbs loose. Free of pain. Hair whirling in the breeze from an open window. Without a care.

I was about to say that, back then, I assumed security was a sort of birthright, but no, that would be a lie. To be honest, I already knew a good measure of insecurity. As a seven- and eight-year old, I had been sent to boarding school, which was a terrifying experience of helplessness. So . . . no, I did not grow up feeling entitled to safety. In fact, after those boarding school years if my parents would go on a date and leave me with my brothers, I could not sleep until I heard the light rattle of the front door and the whump that signaled they were back inside. My parents had to reclaim me, re-establishing their protection, before I was able to rest without worry. Only then could I become child-like again. Only then could I give worry back to “bigger people,” abandoning myself to the journey—to the swaying vehicle and the waxy canvas and the earthy softness of the sleeping bags.

Our cat Miles is funny in an entirely un-self-conscious feline way. He leaps into any container that becomes available—grocery bag, cupboard, ice chest—then falls asleep. I have photos of him dozing in cardboard boxes and wicker baskets, even a plastic cake cover from the grocery store. And we love to watch him sleep like that—so at peace. We joke that he is posing for us, aware of how trusting he appears. But of course he is not aware, which is exactly why we find him so charming. Symbolic of the way we once were ourselves. Like babes in our mother’s arms.

It's a jump, but ancient Julian of Norwich declared in the fourteenth century, having survived a near-fatal illness, “All will be well, and all manner of things shall be well,” and people have been quoting her ever since. For isn’t that what we all long for more than anything—the innocent belief that we do not need to worry because someone more powerful will attend to all our cares?

In the case of Julian, who was somehow able to keep seeing like a child even in her pain, worry was the property of God. And now that I look back, I see that I, as a child at boarding school, went to God for the same solace. When I lay down under the sheer weight of my worries—at night in the dark dorm room with the other seven-year-olds in their bunks—then I would talk to God silently, turning over those fears one by one: whether my parents were still alive or whether they would show up when the holidays came or what to do with the surge of sorrow that threatened to swallow me. In

those early years, before I became an adult and felt the need to take more command, God was in the firmament, winking quietly from the stars, and though I worried I could be overlooked, I kept putting my faith in that watchful presence. All would be well because all *had* to be well.

One day not long ago, our beloved Miles went missing, and though we scoured the neighborhood shaking a bag of his food and calling, he did not emerge. We searched down alleys in the dark. We asked a dozen passers-by if they had seen a rotund tabby cat. We posted a photo on our neighborhood list-serve and another on Facebook. We even put his litter box outside so that he could smell it and make his way home.

For four days, we struggled to fall asleep because, paradoxically, we were the ones overwhelmed with concern. Then, finally, a neighbor called. She had heard a meow in her basement. She wondered if, when her husband was gardening and left the outer basement door open, our cat had become curious and gone down there.

That explanation seemed as plausible as any, given Miles's predilection for leaping into unknown hiding places. Sure enough, as soon as I called into their basement, he appeared from behind a stack of boxes, whimpering. I picked him up, overjoyed, and carried him to freedom. I felt that, indeed, All was well and all manner of things would be well. . . until he leaped from my arms, desperate to be away from the jail cell into which he had so naively ventured.

Anxious in the sudden vastness of the out-of-doors, Miles ran nervously up and down the walk beside our house—to the back door then the front, then hesitating between. Would he be safer inside or out? Who knew? Now that it was imperative for him to be aware and find his own safety, he was completely unsure of himself.

Unless you become like one of these, Jesus said, pointing to a child in the crowd, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. And I “get it” now—now that I am an adult with the adult worries that automatically accompany “independence”: the unappreciative boss, the medical bills, the hesitating engine, the votes to cast. I am nothing like our

pre-loss cat, who could leap into a washing machine and fall asleep, if given the opportunity.

These days I am my own worst enemy, even if I try to sit cross-legged and breathe in, breathe out, concentrating on being present in my own animal body, trying to be mindful in the Buddhist sense, which is to let go of my ego and the attachments that accompany it. Without a care? No. There are definitely cares now. Cares that swoop through the perpetual dusk of my mind, random and unpredictable as bats after bugs.

When I finally gathered Miles up again and carried him into our house, he ate ravenously—as if the food might disappear. Then he surprised me. He went straight to the back door—to the pane of glass which displayed the sunlit outer world—and he cried and cried.

I didn't want to let him out, for obvious reasons, but at last I reluctantly opened the door. How wistful I felt, as I watched him slink under the bushes, turning to scan the yard from his chosen hiding place. I stepped out with a book, to be more present, but as soon as I sat down, he came sprinting to me, mewing. He ventured away, but when I looked up from my book, he came dashing back.

Would he ever be the same carefree cat? Would he ever leap into unknown spaces like he used to? Would he settle down to rest if I closed the cupboard door behind him?

I thought I knew the answer. I feared I did. For once we have begun the journey into self-awareness, how can we go back to who we once were?

On the other hand, though, aren't we all still un-self-conscious children at some level? Underneath all the adult bluster and the props that go with it—the hard-earned house and the clothes and the bank accounts that we have built up as a sort of fortress—aren't we all still quite small, therefore not truly in control? And even if we cannot fall back into our young, elastic bodies and sleep with that same animal abandon, isn't there some way in which we might go forward instead, into a new mysterious place where we become “like” children again? Adults but completely at ease?

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Analogies have their limits, I know. However, I am happy to report that a few days ago my wife called me into the bathroom, where I found Miles fast asleep in the sink, curled into a perfect oval of resting fur.



**Tim Bascom's** newest book, *Climbing Lessons*, is a collection of forty brief personal narratives about fathers and sons in his Midwestern American clan. Bascom is also the author of a novel, a collection of essays, and two prize-winning memoirs. His fiction has appeared in *Fiction Southeast*, *Mainstreet Rag*, and *Lalitamba*. His essays have won prizes at *The Missouri Review* and *Florida Review*, being selected for the anthologies *Best Creative Nonfiction* and *Best American Travel Writing*.