



4-26-2019

Second Birth Into Paradox

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Recommended Citation

Wisser, Abigail C. (2019) "Second Birth Into Paradox," *Cedarville Review*: Vol. 19 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol19/iss1/5>

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Keywords

Cedarville, creative writing, nonfiction, Abigail Wisser

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Nonfiction

SECOND BIRTH INTO PARADOX

ABIGAIL WISSER

When my father baptized me in Paradox Lake before I left for college, he plunged me under before "...and the Spirit," left the pastor's lips. I sucked cold lake water up my nose, and electric creature fear swamped my nervous system. I spasmed. But Dad crushed my arms across my chest in an 'x' and kept me submerged. After a few drowned seconds, he hoisted me up. My feet found purchase in shifting lake sand. I dashed the water from my eyes, dragged in a rough breath through raw lungs, and felt my wet t-shirt cling like loose skin to my arms and my stomach. I stood gasping, waterlogged and goose-fleshy in front of a congregation of strangers, knee-deep in the shallow end of the beachfront. The acidic burning in my lungs left me tasting blood in the back of my throat all day, even after the grilled hot dogs and sour cream and onion potato chips.

Internally, I agonized over whether this baptism counts.



In the middle-school youth group room, Mr. Motes sternly insisted that if we kids were serious about being Christians, we had to get

baptized. If we didn't, we directly disobeyed God. Flickering fluorescent light panels on the ceiling backlit Mr. Motes, making a synthetic, starchy halo around his body.

"You'll know when you should get baptized," Mr. Motes continued, "You'll feel the prompting of the Holy Spirit on your conscience."

A pulse of anxious energy radiated from my heart, shot through the ganglia of nerves in my chest and stomach, circulated every time Mr. Motes scanned the group. I agonized and avoided eye contact. Was this anxiety a prompting of the Spirit, or the fear of baptism, of the piercing eyes of the congregation, judging my purity of spirit? Fears mingled and flowed together: fear of man, fear of God, fear of man as God, fear of the God-man, and finally, at the end of night, I was left with only clammy palms and drained adrenal glands.



In my senior year of college, I returned to the passage in which the coward and hypocrite Nicodemus stole into Jesus's dwelling by night, begging for answers.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again," said Jesus, "he cannot see the kingdom of God."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus responded, perhaps exasperated, "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Probably he wrung his hands at Jesus, who probably smiled.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." I'm sure that Jesus's eyes twinkled with mirth, knowing his fluid answer would both frustrate and soothe.

I think back on my baptism. Paradox Lake is a scoop in the Earth plowed by a glacier, fed by the Adirondack watershed and the Schroon River: a womb tucked away in the mountains, sustaining and recreating life. My Paradox birth was both an emergence from and into bodily

and psychological agony: I choked on lake water and the congregation's expectations of me. But I believe the Spirit seeped in sometime after that. Now, when I feel a surge of cortisol, my spirit better senses the difference between human anxiety and divine conviction.



*See from his Head, his Hands, his Feet,
Sorrow and Love flow mingled down!
Did ever such Love and Sorrow meet?
Or Thorns compose so rich a Crown?*