

Lessons from a Summer in Water

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First Parish in Brookline

Most of us have been in school at some point in our lives. For some of us that was long ago, some of us are still in school—whether it’s preschool, or grade school, high school, college, or graduate school. I was in school just two years ago!

Sometimes in the Fall, when you come back to school, your teacher asks you to write or tell about what you did that summer. Or your friends ask you that. So, I thought I could tell you a few stories from my summer, to help you get to know me better and also share some things I learned.

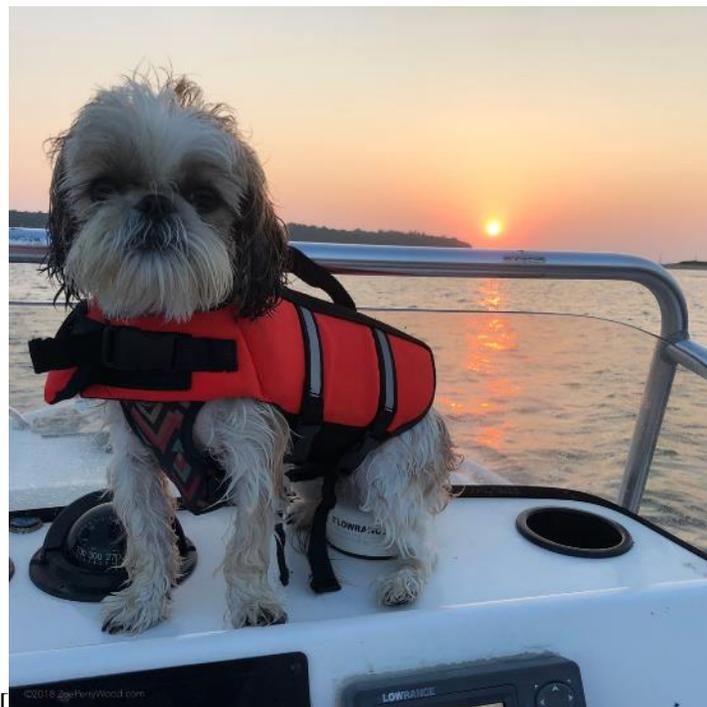
The first story is about Ali Baba



Ali Baba is a Shih Tzu and he’s two-years old. Zoe and I have four children between us, but Ali Baba (we call him Baba) is our baby. For fun, Baba likes to play fetch, go for long walks in the woods, and snuggle. We like to do all of those things—well, maybe not fetch—and we also like to travel. This summer we visited a few different places near the water, and whenever we could, we took Baba with us. He doesn’t love the traveling part—doesn’t really like cars or boats, and especially not airplanes!—but he does love to be with us.



Our friends, Beth and Bill, rented a cabin on beautiful Crescent Lake in Maine and they invited us to come up for a couple of nights. And, of course, Ali Baba came too—especially since Beth is one of his favorite people. Now another thing about Baba is that he doesn't really love water. He doesn't like getting wet—not even for a nice warm bath. He sometimes will wade in the water on a hot day, but he's been known to refuse a walk if it's raining! If Baba is in the water, he can swim, but he's not a strong swimmer, so he wears a lifejacket.



You can see that he really isn't too happy about the lifejacket, but he knows he has to wear it to go out on our boat, so he puts up with it. Though sometimes we have to chase him around to get it on him! The first morning we were in Maine, Beth showed us that there were three kayaks on the dock.



She suggested that we each take one and paddle down the lake and we thought that was a great idea. Just one problem—we had forgotten Ali Baba's lifejacket. We considered taking him in the kayak without it, but we didn't want to take the risk that he might decide to jump out. So we decided to leave him on the dock. We knew he'd bark for a few minutes, but we figured he'd stop after a while and go back up to the house with Beth's daughter. And, sure enough, after we'd paddled away for a while, he stopped barking. Next thing we knew, a motorboat pulled up next to us and the driver said: "Do you have a small white dog?" "Yes!" we said. "Well, he was swimming after you and when he got to our dock, he was struggling, so we pulled him out." We paddled back quickly and there he was...



...soaking wet, but very happy to see us. You can't tell in this picture, but he was actually so happy to see us, he was wagging all over. We scooped him up in a towel...



...and apologized to him over and over again. But, he had already forgiven us.

And now, whenever we go in a kayak, or on a boat, Baba always wears his lifejacket.



I still don't know if he understands why, but we haven't forgotten.

So, here's the lesson I learned from that story in water: It's about love. How even if we're very small, we can have such big hearts that we'll face something that really scares us, do something we hate, to be near the people we love. That's devotion. And courage. And there are examples of that all around us, every day.

The second story is about our grandson, Cooper.



Cooper is 10 years old, almost 11. We went to the ocean on vacation with Coop and his family this summer. Cooper loves being on or in the water. He's a good swimmer, but he still wears his lifejacket when we're out on a boat. And this summer, Cooper arrived, determined to catch his first fish. I mean, he was sure he was going to catch a fish. The thing is, that my son, Joel, and his girlfriend had been trying for days; no luck.



But they took Coop out in the boat, helped him bait the hook, and then he waited. And, lo and behold...



...he had a bite!

He pulled and pulled, and reeled and reeled, with everyone on the boat cheering him on...



And pretty soon, he could see there was a fish—a real fish—on his line!



And he was one happy boy that day!

So, what did I learn from this story in water? Well, sometimes we believe in something, really believe, even if there is no evidence, no way to prove that it is there. That's called faith. Cooper had it. Many of us—young, old and in-between, have things they believe in. I think it's really important to support them—not necessarily agree or believe the same way—but let them have their faith. Faith and determination have taken some of us a long way.

My last story is about Walden Pond...



Zoe and I are lucky enough to live not too far from this beautiful expanse of water. Close enough that we can swim there several times a week in the summer and into early fall. And, even luckier for me, when you turn 62 you can buy a lifetime pass for \$10! Many of you know about Walden, I'm sure. It was made famous in the book, written by Henry David Thoreau when he walked a couple of miles from his Concord home and lived there for two years.

Now, I love to swim. As Kamila Shamsie says: "It's mountains for some, deserts for others, clear open plains for still others, but I am a creature of water."

I'm not a very skilled or fast swimmer, I just love being in the water. But a couple of years ago I got bored swimming my strongest and steadiest stroke, which is the breaststroke, or at least a version of the breaststroke, and decided to teach myself to swim the backstroke. I watched Missy Franklin do it in the Olympics—she made it look easy!

It took me a while to master the stroke, synchronize with my kicking, and to be relaxed enough that I could move steadily and smoothly through water. But when I finally did, I could look up and get such a beautiful view of the sky over the pond!



Zoe and I tend to swim in the late afternoon/early evening after work, so we often see the sky turning beautiful colors. This view, swimming on my back, gave me a whole new perspective.



It taught me one more lesson in water... Somehow looking at the natural world from this perspective makes me feel even more connected to nature and to something greater than myself.



On my back there are no other swimmers, no beach chairs, no lifeguards, no bathhouse. Not even any sounds. Just me, surrounded by water and sky and a rim of treetops.



My last lesson: A deep sense of connection with mystery and nature can come in unexpected ways. Stay open to the unexpected.



Those are my summer lessons in water: courage and devotion, faith and determination, and mystery and connection. I hope you will share stories or lessons from your summer with each other or maybe with me after the service. Maybe instead of asking: “What did you do this summer?” We can start asking: “What did you learn? What surprised you?” I love that we have this way of connecting and reconnecting through our stories. Thank you for listening to mine.

Amen and blessed be.