

July 2014

## Divine moments

Graham Salisbury

### Recommended Citation

Salisbury, G. (2014). Divine moments. *OLA Quarterly*, 1(3), 6-9+. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1041>

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*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

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**E**piphanies. Almost everyone has them. Without them we wouldn't grow, expand, understand, become. They are gifts from the Universe.

These are the blips on the continuum of our lives that define our humanity, that open our hearts and fill them with some new realization, some breath-stopping emotion, some expanded humanness. They often appear with sudden tears. Or overwhelming happiness. Even fear.

They could open gently from the reaching hand of hope. And they can even come with a healthy shot of cynicism.

Sometimes they burst into your life like shooting stars. Then vanish before you blink.

I call them divine moments.

I hunger for them, and yearn for them to come to me. But it doesn't work

that way. These moments arrive on their own timetable. A thought, an emotion, or an understanding quite unexpectedly floods my veins and takes me beyond my insignificant piddling self, dragging me out of the muddy ruts of my busy, everyday life.

Way out. Light years out.

And for a moment, I soar.

But more than this, each of these epiphanous moments is a tiny diamond around which I can build a story I can care about.

When I was sixteen on the Big Island of Hawaii my friend Keoki and I hijacked his father's water ski boat and raced it down the coast from Keauhou to Kealakekua Bay. The warm ocean was deep-water blue, and the only clouds anywhere lounged like lizards way out on the horizon.

The boat was one of those glossy varnished-wood jobbies, with glinting chrome hardware on the dashboard. You steered it like a Rolls Royce, with a mahogany steering wheel. It maxed out at something like seven hundred miles an hour, with whining engines and a fountaining rooster-tail screaming out the back. A teenager's dream.

The rocky coast cut sharp and desolate to our left. A lonely coast. Nothing lived there, except maybe bugs and mongooses. All I saw was black lava and the white of waves thumping along the shoreline.

And a fisherman.

I squinted and shaded my eyes as we raced by not far from where he stood.

He was shore casting, probably for ulua. An old straw hat shaded his face. How'd he get down there? There weren't any roads that I knew of, and to hike there would take hours.

I waved, but he didn't wave back.

I'd seen these solitary fishermen often, ghosts who hardly

gave me the time of day. I watched him shrink to a speck behind the boat.

We rounded the last point, racing into Kealakekua Bay like we owned the place. Keoki slowed and circled in to the glassy, dark-green cove on the north side. Here, we were going to water-ski until our feet fell off.

Unlike the desolate coast we'd just passed, the land here swelled with abundant foliage. A jungle, almost. On one side, a towering mass of cliffs rose hundreds of feet, cliffs with ancient Hawaiian burial caves pocking its face. And below, at the water's edge, tons upon tons of fallen boulders bathed in the sun and sank into the depths.

This was a deep-water cove. Abysmally deep.

Keoki headed for the monument, a white spike engulfed by trees and weeds. No one lived there. There was only the jungle, and the monument. We eased up to the small landing.

I jumped out with the bow line and Keoki hung foam rubber bumpers over the gunnel. After we secured the boat we stood in the stillness, listening.

But there was nothing to hear.

The place was as silent as a graveyard.

It was beautiful and creepy at the same time. Beautiful water, beautiful cliffs. Creepy monument. That spot where we were standing was right exactly where Captain Cook got his head smashed in a couple hundred years earlier. Right there under my feet. Gave me the willies.

Keoki wanted to explore the jungle. But I didn't. Too spooky. I told him I was going diving. He shook his head and said when he got back we could tear up the bay on our skis.

I got a snorkel, a pair of fins, and a face mask out of the boat, then jumped over the side. I put the gear on in the water and went under.

The ocean was as clear as a swimming pool. Fish everywhere, and rocks and coral and sea-plants. The usual stuff.

Usual ... until I swam farther off shore.

Ka'awaloa cove wasn't a typical place. The ocean floor fell off almost immediately, precipitously, the bottom dropping down into lightless depths, down to a haze, then down, down, and down beyond that.

I didn't go down with it.

I swam over it, floating on the surface, my noisy breaths echoing in the plastic snorkel.

It was so deep there was nothing to see. I could have been swimming way out in the ocean, for all the nothingness below me. I jerked up, suddenly thinking maybe I was in deep ocean. But the spike still stood nearby, and the jungle, and the cliff. Weird ... the sudden depth so close to shore.

I swam farther out, still looking down at nothing, and wondering what I expected to see. Maybe a sunken boat,

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## Divine Moments

by *Graham Salisbury*

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or a whale. But there was only the eerie glow of radiant shafts of light shooting up at me from the depths.

I started to get nervous.

Then, nearly croaked when I saw a dark shape.

A giant undersea bird, or dragon, or something. I could barely make it out. A moving shadow in the deep distance.

A bolt of fear shot through me. I'd seen shadows in the ocean before ... from boats. But I'd never been in the ocean with them. With nothing between us. No boat. No barrier. I back-peddled, then turned and scurried back to shore. I climbed out of the water breathing hard and hopping Keoki was deep in the jungle. I needed time to calm down.

My hands were trembling. My heart was racing.

Why?

Nothing had happened, really.

Yet there I was, as scared as you get.

In that moment I caught an expansive glimpse of how insignificant I might be. How, once out of my protective shell, I could very well be little more than some sea monster's lunch. In that epiphanous spark I got my first notion of the fact that there were other worlds that onion-skinned around the one I lived in. The whole picture developed instantly. The shadow, the ignoring fisherman, and even the spooky spike of history lived in worlds that ran parallel to mine. It startled me. Even shocked me ... to think that the world might not be revolving around me.

I was something, yes ... but beyond my own little world, I wasn't very much of something. I was a puffer fish of self-importance who'd just gotten popped. My, my. Welcome to reality.

Divine moments.

I cherish my memories of youth, but especially those sudden insightful ones. I was self-important, as most young people can be during their teen years. And my life was fairly rudderless and full of personal loss. It was rich with boundless freedom, and poor on parental guidance. Yet that freedom taught me more about taking care of myself than anything else possibly could have.

Now, I carry a very strong empathy for young people. Because I remember being one. I remember sea shadows, and the vast undersea otherworld, even the spike and the silent fisherman, and other jarring and wondrous things. It was there in the whirlwind of growing up that the basic elements of my life were shaped. Most of my adult issues funnel back to roots in those small kid times—my fear of illness and pain, my lingering feelings of inadequacy, my self-absorbed drive to succeed. Those things still exist in me, though I now have a little more charge over them. But I can clearly remember the power those forces held over me. Criminy, is there anyone who doesn't remember discovering the concept of mortality? Talk about a whack on the side of the head.

For a writer these memories are jewels.

But you don't have to be young to have an epiphany.

One of the most powerful of these divine moments came to me just months ago. And, as always, I wasn't expecting it.

I came home from work one day, walking into the house with my usual, "Hi, I'm home," leading the way. Zachary, my then fifteen-month-old son, was sitting on the floor with his back to me. He didn't turn around. My, my, I thought. That little guy sure is focused on something

"Zachy," I said again.

Still no response.

I stooped down beside him, startling him. When he saw me his eyes widened with delight. He liked his old dad, and showed it with those happy eyes.

Later that night I kept thinking about the way he'd ignored me when I'd first walked in. Couldn't get that out of my mind. It just bugged me.

It happened again a few days later and I joked to Robyn, my wife, that I thought Zachary was half deaf, sometimes. "Naah," she said. "He can hear. I know he can."

But as the days went on even she began to worry. Maybe he was more than just slow to develop speech. And maybe there was more behind the non-responses, behind the total lack of vowel or consonant sound development. Nothing, now that we thought about it, really came from his lips, except maybe mmmm, mmmm.

We took him to a pediatric audiologist and had his hearing checked.

From that point on it's a long and very difficult story, one I won't get into here. The bottom line, though, was that Zachary couldn't hear a hoot. He was deaf, and profoundly so.

Still refusing to believe it, Robyn and I took him down to the Oregon coast town of Manzanita for that year's Fourth of July parade. Keenan, Zachary's four-year-old brother, was absolutely bug-eyed at all the excitement—fire engines and sirens and floats and police cars blaring horns and flashing blue and red lights. I had Zachary in a stroller, and turned him away from the procession as the wailing fire engines crawled by, me with my fingers plugging my ears.

Zachary didn't even flinch, didn't turn around, didn't fight to see and watch and hear the ear-busting racket behind him. He just smiled up at me. "What are we doing Dad?" the look on his face seemed to say.

Those first few days of realizing what life had handed this little boy were, for me, deeply painful. And even more so for Robyn. This deaf child was our child.

I now know that deafness is not at all the end of the world. In fact, soundlessness may carry its own set of blessings. But in those first moments it was the end of the world: Zachary would never hear Handel or the Beach Boys or

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Lassie barking on TV; he and I would never talk man to man about girls or homework or Monday night football; he'd never learn to read, and would never tramp around with Huck Finn, or live on the Island of the Blue Dolphins, or cry with Kunta Kinte over life's injustices; Zachary would never talk to his brothers and sisters and cousins. He'd be trapped in silence, lonely and sad and left out and helplessly lost.

It's rather embarrassing to admit that Robyn and I actually thought those thoughts. But in those struggling first days our emotions were stretched beyond reason. But, being human, we did what humans do: we shifted our thinking to deal with our need, and stepped beyond our own self-pity.

Of course, we were dead wrong about all that helplessness stuff.

And our broken hearts mended rather quickly.

But talk about epiphanies.

Oh boy, did my heart open to another basic fact of life. Just as I discovered years ago at Kealakekua Bay that I was not the center of the world, so now did I discover that I was not in the least bit separate from the world of disability. I could ignore it, deny it, reject it, or refuse to believe it had a thing to do with me. But what I thought had no bearing on the simple truth of it: we are all one. We are human beings.

And what a monumental embarrassment to think that I'd ever even once been irritated by all those forbidden handicapped parking places and oversized reserved bathroom stalls. What an embarrassment to consider my own arrogance, and ignorance.

A wake-up, slap-in-the-face personal epiphany.

So much has gone on in our family since those first eye-opening days with Zachary, far too much to tell here. But I'd like to share one more personal revelation, probably the greatest of all divine moments I've ever experienced.

One morning before I'd truly accepted the fact that Zachary could not hear, I found him sitting with his back to me at the breakfast table. I crept up behind him with one of those Fisher-Price toys where you push a rubber, air-filled ball, which then shoots a slug of hard plastic up to ring a silver bell.

I pushed the ball in.

Ding!

And Zachary turned around.

For a long, disbelieving moment I stared at him, at first stunned. Then elated! He can hear! Zachary can hear!

I ran and got Robyn. "Watch this," I said. I slipped behind Zachary and rang the bell again.

Of course, nothing happened.

He was deaf.

That he had turned around before had merely been a coin-

cidence. Or perhaps his sense of touch had told him I was there, some slight movement in the flooring that a hearing fool like me would never have picked up.

But even so, in that moment when he had turned around for me, and my hope had soared, I remember our eyes locking. In that instant an extraordinary bridge of something infinite passed between us. The more I thought about it, the more I realized what it was.

Love.

Pure, absolute, ineffable.

Holy moly.

In that speck of eternity I had seen beyond my own petty outward life into this pool of inner godliness. Through no long-suffering struggle of my own I had walked this instantaneous bridge between my son and myself and entered the diamond in the heart of my own existence.

A truly divine moment.

Now, whenever I cup my hands around Zachary's cheeks and stare into his child-clear eyes, I can see glints off that diamond. I can see them because I am now aware of the existence of the diamond, which is a love far deeper than the one I thought lived within me. Drop a nickel-plated Kennedy half-dollar on a concrete floor and listen to it clank. Then drop a pure silver Walking Liberty and hear it ring. You will never think of the Kennedy half as the real thing again.

The truths I have found in myself through Zachary's eyes have shown me how wrong I have been about many things. But mostly about him. His earthly experience will be as wondrous as my own. I now know without question that his life will always be good, because he will refuse to let it go bad. This is who Zachary is. I've seen it, in his eyes.

There is magic in all of our lives, in the sights and sounds and smells and feelings that flood our eyes with emotions, things that break us down and open our hearts and show us we are alive, and connected, and that there is purpose in life. Is this magic not the most precious of all gifts? Is it not the greatest thing we have to share?

I believe that good fiction can, and should, do just that—share these magical human insights. If for nothing else than to make a little sense out of an often senseless world. Good stories don't grow out of the simple exploitation of sensational or weird or extraordinary things. They arise from the heart of common things. Small, everyday things that elevate the art of being human. It's true that in fiction we tell stories about other characters, not ourselves. But even so, we use what lies within us to bring those stories to life.

Paula Fox, a writer whose work I admire and respect, paints a striking image of what I'm trying to say: "Great stories," she says, "give us metaphors that flash upon the mind the way lightning flashes upon the earth, illuminating for an instant an entire landscape that had been hidden in the dark."

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Well, I don't know how well or how poorly my own stories illuminate anyone else's landscape, but I sure as spit hope to illuminate some of my own. Because I know that if I can just capture one small glint off that diamond it will give me a life within my story. And if I have a life within my story, so might a reader. Our shared experience could even glow, and linger, and help us understand a little more about the lives we live.

I wrote *Blue Skin of the Sea* because for most of my life I was, perhaps only in my own mind, a nobody. And, like everyone everywhere, I wanted to be somebody, to feel wanted, to feel important. Sonny Mendoza is somebody. He has a good father and a strong extended family. He struggles, but he does so with a heart. He's challenged, but manages to make decent life choices. He is the boy I should have been. One of the reasons I wrote that book

was to feel what that was like. It felt pretty good.

Under the Blood-Red Sun came about through curiosity. My own future father was at Pearl Harbor the day it was bombed. My uncle was at the beach on the other side of the island and saw a plane blow a boat out of the water. He thought it was target practice. It wasn't.

What were those days like? What did people feel? Were they curious? Stunned? Terrified? I wanted to know.

But more than that, I wrote *Under the Blood-Red Sun* because I wanted to examine the small but powerful things that build friendship and loyalty. As I struggled with that manuscript, I called back the memory of a moment that hit me in young adulthood, a moment of being over-

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## Infant Lapsit Story Time— You Can Do It Too!

*By Linda Bellock  
and B.J. Quinlan  
Youth Services,  
Salem Public Library*

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Holding a regular story time for children younger than two seemed like an overwhelming task. However, after observing Curtis Kiefer's program at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, we realized we had made an easy, fun-to-present program more difficult than it had to be. Anyone with an interest in babies and books can do it!

Our program is scheduled on the same morning every week to make it easy for parents to remember. We gear the lapsit for children up to 24 months, but don't keep out older siblings who come along for the fun. Each program lasts from 20 to 30 minutes, but some parents remain in the story room to network with other parents. (According to many of the moms and dads, this is one of the program's biggest benefits.)

Each week we choose four to six very simple stories (or longer stories the teller can adapt easily). The pictures must be easily "read" by very young children. We have found that stories that require participation—like making animal sounds—work best. Stories that work well can be used again and again, because the babies enjoy hearing their favorites retold.

Music is an essential part of infant lapsit story time. At the beginning of story time and between each book, we sing or perform a large motor activity. We have recorded the songs we use each week to help parents and babies learn the songs and motions. We also add one or two other songs or activities during each lapsit to add variety and broaden the babies and parents repertoire. A stuffed gorilla stands in as the storyteller's "baby," which allows us to model the motions parents can do with their babies during each song or activity. Our gorilla tends to wander from infant to infant during the stories, but he manages to return to us for the musical portions of the program.

We use two storytellers for infant lapsit story time, alternating every other week, because we fought over who was going to be the lucky one to do the program. The rotation keeps us fresh and enthusiastic, allows the parents and the babies to become familiar with two different faces and styles of presentation, and makes our vacation days less painful to the babies because they are still seeing someone they know lead the program.

We started in January with a group of about eight parents and their babies. Word of mouth rapidly created a bigger audience, which has now grown to more than 70 parents, grandparents, sitters, and babies. We let the parents know it is okay to let the babies wander around the room during the program. We don't expect strict attention during the stories because we know we are sharing our enthusiasm for reading. Invariably some story time books are picked up by babies as we read, but we always manage to get them back to share with the group. A basket of board books that circulate are brought to into the story room each week, and we encourage parents to look at them and check out their favorites to share at home.

Infant lapsit is more enjoyable and easier to present than other programs we have put on. If you haven't tried it yet, think about putting an infant lapsit into your regular programming schedule. The rewards are tremendous. ☺

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## Partnerships

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newsletter each year.

Several years ago, the Youth Services Committee of Washington County Cooperative Library Services (WCCLS) began long range planning for library outreach to children in care and their providers. During 1994, the cooperative and West Tuality worked together to complete a needs assessment survey. Librarians and West Tuality staff members prepared the survey. West Tuality provided mailing addresses, and the cooperative provided printing, postage, and the final compilation and reporting of results. More than 800 providers received the survey, and more than a third returned them. The information gathered is helping the libraries plan individual and collective outreach services.

Another way the two organizations work cooperatively is by supporting each other's grant-writing efforts. Several librarians wrote letters of support for a recent grant West Tuality received to encourage reading activities in home-care environments. The public libraries in Cedar Mill, Hillsboro, and Tigard collaborated on a Library Services and Construction Act grant to strengthen their collections of professional support materials, particularly in video format. The West Tuality staff recommended many specific titles to be purchased with grant money.

When West Tuality looked for a way to make its collection of training and informational videos more easily available to the providers it serves, it decided to place them in a library in the cooperative. These videos are now available for loan throughout the county.

Combined efforts to provide continuing education for child care providers have taken several forms. Some libraries provide space for West Tuality-sponsored events. Library staff members present storytelling ideas or shared library resources in other programs. Sesame Street PEP Training has been the most exciting co-sponsored program to date. This half-day participatory program trained providers how to use and expand upon Sesame Street's curriculum goals. Jennifer Jordan, Early Childhood Specialist at Oregon Public Broadcasting, presented the workshop, which was held at three county-library locations during the summer of 1995. The libraries provided on-site publicity, a meeting room, coffee, muffins, and information about library services. West Tuality provided publicity, certification credits, and scholarships for some individuals. The Sesame Street PEP participants received not only hours of enjoyable training, but also a video, resource notebook, Big Bird poster, and many ideas to put into use immediately.

Librarians and the agency professionals who support child care providers use each other's strengths. They promote each other's programs, share resources and expertise, and most importantly, catch each other's enthusiasm for serving care providers and children in care. □

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whelmed by my own emotions at the sight of a couple of high school kids joking around and jostling each other as they walked home from school. Just a couple of jokers, like Mose and Rico, showing me glints off the diamond.

I also wrote that book because I practically choke up whenever I see fathers and sons who actually care about each other. I wanted to magnify that bond, because most certainly I missed that in my life. Through Tomi and his father, and Billy Davis and his, I felt what it was like. And that was pretty dang good, too.

Divine moments.

We can't ask for them. We can't look for them. We can't force them to happen. Because they aren't ours. They belong to the universe. They come when they come.

But when they do come they bring a special magic into our lives and into our stories. And isn't that what we're all hoping to do, bring a little magic into the lives of young people? A little happiness? A little hope?

This is what I think: every kid ought to see a glint or two off his own diamond—nice kids, wandering kids, lost kids, frightening kids. And it would be great if I could show them how to do that. But I can't. And anyway it's not my job. It's far too personal. It has to be done alone.

But what I can do is share what I feel about this mystery called Life by writing the best I can about the things that are important to me.

If I didn't do at least that much I'd be a selfish fool. Arrogance would be my life. Ignorance would be my legacy.

But that's not acceptable.

Not acceptable at all. □

*This speech was delivered by Graham Salisbury at the Oregon Library Association Conference, in Portland, Oregon; April, 1995. This essay also appeared in the 1995 Spring/Summer issue of SIGNAL Journal, a publication of the International Reading Association.*