

Jeremy Adam Smith is managing editor of Greater Good Magazine, a quarterly that explores groundbreaking research into the roots and practice of peace, compassion and well-being.

On Being Here

Here I sit at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. While I often come here to ponder transitions in my life, today I am on my first solo journey into nature as a mother. My son is six months old, and for all that time, I've eaten for him, breathed for him, cried for him. I have forced down eight large glasses of water a day to produce milk for him. At night, I either do or do not sleep for him. Before I left this morning, I woke up with my husband's arm encircling my belly and my son's forefinger and thumb so delicately pinching my wrist that I did not even know where my own body began and ended.

When I try to find that body in the bath at night, I get crazy with essential oils, the jars of sea-green powder labeled *Tranquility* or *Healing*. I double, sometimes triple, the suggested one capful, overpowering our tiny bathroom with essence of vanilla, sandalwood, lavender — some smell that I can cling to. The jingle *Calgon, take me away*, has, after taking up space in my brain all these years, finally taken on meaning. But there are always reminders of my son: his mewling on the monitor, his bath toys clattering down when I reach for a towel. I want to, no, I need to be taken away, but I never go far.

The pond shimmers today, a blue-black quartz catching sunlight on every rippling facet. An apron of raised ice clings to this western edge that the sun just now reaches. I am huddled on this stretch of beach that has become my favorite launching pad for a swim across. Gritty brown sand imbeds itself in the tired wool of my houndstooth coat.

Since my son's birth, there has been the rare dinner out with my husband or friends. That means wearing fresh stretchy pants and smelling less of spit-up than some perfume from another era in my life, I try to be myself. But then I'll see a child, and I'll decline dessert, jiggle my leg. My husband smiles knowingly. Or so he thinks. But he can't possibly know. He can love and nurture and care unceasingly, and yet who but a mother can know?

I want one person to know. I want one person to understand this love and for maybe — oh, I don't know — five minutes, relieve me of its all-consuming intensity. I want someone to know this cry means he wants to be held and that cry means he wants to stand

up, but not like that, rather like this, with his hands caught in mine and his fat little elbows tightly locked. I just want to deliver him, for a few short moments, into arms as safe and sure as mine, to the closeness of a heart as familiar as mine. I miss my sister, who lives in Germany. I miss my father, who is no longer living, and my mother, who is far away. But mostly, I miss owning a little bit of myself.

So I am here at Walden Pond. It's a Wednesday morning, and my husband has taken time off work to spend the day with our child. I almost went to a cafe to read. I almost stayed home because those cries and noises I need to escape from are my heartbeat. But then I remembered this pond, with its 150-foot depth and mile of length, and I knew I needed to come here. I remembered that sometimes when life makes me breathless, I must go to a place that is bigger than I am. I must stay for some moments in the quiet embrace of nature.

The pond is flanked with maples and oaks and pines and narrow white birches that lean in as if to impart a secret. Except for the birches, the trees are a muted khaki color this time of year. It's the third of March, a month of transitions, when lamb and lion cross paths. When I stop my pen long enough to listen, I can hear the ice crackle in surrender to the steady heat of the early spring sun. I watch some renegade oak leaves trip lightly across the pond's surface. Winter boundaries come undone. A few morning walkers pass me. They say hello to me. They do not smile at my baby son. They don't even know I have one.

And so this reminder to myself is one that I want to whisper to new mothers and, at the same time, hold inside like a deep breath: Find a moment to surround yourself with nature so perfect, so grand, that you can actually notice you belong in this world, that there is room for you, that beauty and harmony welcome your tiredness. Let yourself be relieved, if only for a second, of the joyful burden of responsibility and love. Listen to the ice crack, the leaves rustle.

When I walk back toward the car, both ready and reluctant to go, I watch the ice begin to separate. Sections break off, leaving precarious looking black rivulets between them. It's a jigsaw puzzle with the pieces all positioned, but not interlocked. The rivulets widen as the wind coaxes the crystalline chunks toward the center of the pond, and I cheer the powers of escape. In an hour or so, there will be no more ice. The sun and water will conspire to that end, but I won't be here to see it happen. In the meantime, I stop to notice my presence at this pond, my feet on the soil, the breeze on my left cheek. *I am here*, I tell myself. Then I say it again, this time out loud: "I am here."

Sandra A. Miller's writing has appeared in Modern Bride, Walking, The Hartford Courant, The Providence Journal, Skirt and other publications. Sandra also blogs at her relationship-self-help site, HaveAQuickie.net. Recently, Sting's wife, Trudie Styler, turned one of Sandra's personal essays into a short film called "Wait," produced by Glamour Magazine.