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Letters from the Divide

Wiping the Slate Clean

Pam Houston

With the inspiration of spring's new beginnings, Pam Houston shares her own recent experience of renewal.

When my good friend Tami called and asked if I would like to join her for a five-day, all-expenses-paid retreat at Miraval Spa outside of Tucson, Arizona, there was only one possible answer. I was getting over a marriage, getting over a book tour, getting over a year of too much work and not enough bodywork. I was so twisted up from airplane seats and shut down from sadness that I felt like one of those junk cars right after the giant machine has pounded it into a little square.

I had never been to a place like Miraval, and wasn't sure what I would find there. I figured there would be wonderful massage therapists, lots of healthy food, and great yoga classes. I had seen the photographs of the Olympic-sized pool right at the foot of the Santa Catalina Mountains, the peace-inducing fountains carved out of native stone, a covey of desert quail skittering between the gently sloping pathways. I was a little skeptical about the cost for those who *were* paying (as in, how does charging someone \$700 per night lead to their feeling serene and balanced?) and more than a little skeptical about what I would call the *woo-woo* tone of the brochure.

Don't get me wrong: I am entirely convincible. And in past years, I have been convinced enough to be helped toward well-being by, among others, Thai massage, shiatsu, acupressure, Reiki, and even having a spirit deer blown into my chest. I knew I would like Miraval—and like being there with Tami. What I didn't know was that when my five days at Miraval were over, I would leave feeling better than I had ever felt in my life.

I didn't know I would take several classes from Gabriel Azoulay, the finest, most affirming yoga teacher on the planet. I didn't know I would have a one-hour meeting with a nutritionist who would completely revise my essential understanding of my body's relationship to food. I didn't know that Tami and I would get up at five o'clock one morning to drive to the ranch next door to take a class called Photographing Horseplay, where horses romped and bucked through great arcs of sprinkler water in the desert dawn. I didn't know that Tami and I, who out in the real world are extremely well matched in our quick, sometimes biting humor and cynicism, would begin speaking to each other in a strange, self- and other-affirming diction, would walk the meditation labyrinth every day and take it seriously, would laugh together more in five days than we had in a year. And I didn't know that I would meet a Watsu practitioner named Shannon.

What I liked immediately about Shannon was how much she did not resemble one of your typical new age healers. Nothing ethereal or soft-spoken or quietly condescending about her, Shannon is strong-

shouldered, round-faced, and blonde, with a great big laugh and an almost overwhelming intensity in her clear blue eyes. She seemed more like a presidential campaign manager, or a former soccer star, or the hottest young chef in Minneapolis than a healer. But as we stood facing each other in the shallow end of a warm swimming pool that morning, there was no mistaking her power, and I happily put myself, literally, into her large, freckled hands.

“The more you can make yourself like a piece of spaghetti,” she said, as she affixed various floats to my limbs, “the farther we’ll get with this. You’ve got to let go completely and trust me to hold you up.”

That turned out to be no problem whatsoever. For a few minutes, I was conscious of the pool’s warm water, of Shannon’s guiding my shoulders this way and that, of my hair trailing along in the water behind me as I moved. For the rest of the hour, I was in some other place entirely and was amazed when, with the same deft touch, she “brought me back” to full consciousness and said quietly in my ear that our time was up.

“Come here and talk to me for a minute,” she said, bobbing backward to the part of the pool that was shaded by a fine mesh overhead. “Something happened during our session, and it was pretty unusual; I think I should tell you about it.”

“Yes,” I said, “please.”

“Well,” she said, “we got into the quiet place, you know?”

I nodded. So that was where I had been.

“And I was trying to work that spike out of your hip.” I nodded again. I knew all about the spike in my hip. It was my nemesis, my chronic pain spot, the result of my angry father’s having broken my femur when I was four years old and the half year in a body cast that set it all back together at a slightly awkward angle. The pain had gotten worse in the years since my father died, and another massage therapist had suggested that his spirit might have taken up residence in there.

“Anyway,” she said, “I got that spike out.” I flexed my hip underwater, and sure enough the pain was at least temporarily gone. “And then this big”—she paused a moment—“let’s call it”—she paused again—“well, let’s not call it anything right now.” But with her hands she had made the distinct outline of a cage. “It came down with us inside it, and I thought, *Wow, what is this?* And then all of a sudden there was this *WHOOSH!* And this thing pulled every single spike out of your body.”

“Like a magnet!” I said, without knowing how I knew it.

“Exactly!” she said, her eyes sparkling. “And they told me to tell you,” she went on, “they said, it’s up to you, you know? You can do whatever you want, but right now you are spike-free. You’ve got a clean slate. It’s entirely up to you how many of those spikes you want to put back in there.”

“None of them!” I said, only momentarily tempted to ask who *they* were.

“Pretty cool, huh?” she said.

It was. Tami and I left Miraval the next morning in love with our own bodies—strong, limber, properly fueled, and 100% spike-free.