

WHAT'S HARDER THAN SWIMMING TO CAMBODIA?
Searching For Spalding Gray's perfect Moment

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The Feathertale Review #4, 2009

(Illustrations by Mark Cabuena)



Many of Spalding Gray's best lines aren't the least bit funny, because they are so simple, too life affirming: "You never know when you are going to have a perfect moment." In breezy sunlight, one of the hottest days in July, I stood with my wife Dale against a railing of the Staten Island Ferry. As it cruised into New York Harbour, I was trying to get my head around a humorous angle on suicide. Not my own, of course. It was research for a book about swimming with writers around the world, *Water and Desire*, my own version of Spalding's "Monster in a Box" work in progress. Specifically, a chapter on Spalding Gray, one of the funniest men in America who had taken his own life. Oops.

Only a day before, Dale and I had been 40 km away at Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald's house in Westport Connecticut. A For Sale sign stuck in the front lawn, and no one was home, so naturally I hopped a couple of fences to check out the swimming pool, then we drove a few blocks to Campo Beach on Long Island Sound where Scott and Zelda used to swim. There, I did my

first of several crazed swims to recreate a kind of perfect Spalding Gray moment - swimming the last five paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby*.

Slowly, the enormous Manhattan skyline grew, spreading out as the ferry pulled away. It was a glorious day, and way too cheery to be contemplating suicide. We stared at the immensity of heaving water. Man, all I wanted to do was get wet, go for a swim. I was determined to swim with Spalding. With the Statue of Liberty getting closer, everyone gleefully leaned on the same side of the boat. I wondered how many of the 20 million people a year who travel on this ferry thought about writer, actor, performer Spalding Gray. How many knew about the tragicomedy of Spalding Gray's life, and his buoyant optimism, black moods, the chatty intimacy of his celebrated monologues, outrageous hubris, political savvy, his brilliant irreverent humour, and boyish charm? Or that at the age of 62, on January 10, 2004 on the coldest night in decades, he leapt off the Staten Island Ferry into black water, Swimming to Cambodia-style. For two months his tortured, heartbroken family and friends waited until Spalding finally surfaced on March 7. After travelling miles along the spooky harbour bottom, Spalding had been swept by the tidal pull of the East River up into the guts of New York City, rather than out to sea on his way to Cambodia.

Spalding's famous monologues were always delivered alone in a chair behind a wooden desk with only a notebook, and a glass of water. I'd never seen any of his monologues live, though I'd read the books and seen the films. He was a mesmerizing, crazy, vulnerable, hilarious entertainer. An introspective, public confessor who liked to rant at the cosmos, tempt fate, mess with karma, needle nirvana, and poke fun at life's scariest moments. Funny writers like David Sedaris, Anne Lamott, George Saunders and David Rakoff owe the self-deprecating, brazen candour of their autobiographical style to Spalding. And you have to smirk at the genius of his titles: *Sex and Death at Age 14*, *Terrors of Pleasure*, *Gray's Anatomy*, *Swimming To Cambodia*. *Monster In a Box* was a perfect metaphor about writer's block and coming to terms with his gnarly 1900-page work in progress that eventually became a novel, *Impossible Vacation*, which, like most of his work is about coming to terms with the suicide of his own mother, age 52.

I think Spalding and I would have enjoyed each other's company, because we share many interests and obsessions, the same gallows humour. His memoir, *Morning Noon and Night* and my memoir, *House Inside the Waves* deals with the perils and pleasures of family life. He too was a manic depressive, introverted extrovert who had made a career out of being ADD,

and he was a mad body surfer, and swimmer. Most importantly, he also never felt comfortable away from water. One of his last books, *It's a Slippery Slope*, explores the sublime joys of skiing, mid life crisis and fatherhood. My last book, *House Inside the Waves* explores the sublime joys of surfing, mid life crisis and fatherhood. I'm sure he would have appreciated the Sharks Happen metaphor that floats throughout my own work.

On the bright side, without even getting into the water, and with my Speedo laced up a tad too tight, I was already having a perfect moment on the ferry. I had one arm around Dale, smelling the shampoo in her lovely long hair as it blew against my face. As I gripped Dale closely it occurred to me that although I'd been married to this girl for over three decades of perfect and not-so-perfect moments, one of us will eventually outlive the other. In my other hand was a dog-eared copy of Spalding's last book, *Life Interrupted: The Unfinished Monologue*. According to the back cover, Spalding's long time friend, Francine Prose (who has a pretty cool writer's name) says the essence of all of Spalding's work was a profoundly metaphysical inquiry into how we manage to live despite the knowledge that we are someday going to die. Given the fact that a year earlier in England I had swum a mile of the river Ouse in Sussex where Virginia Woolf met her own watery demise, where she too drifted for a couple of months to and fro below the surface of a tidal estuary - my all time favourite line by Spalding Gray is his response to the goofy question: By whom in history would you most like to be spanked? And he quipped, "Virginia Woolf does come to mind."

Other writers less funny than Spalding had met their aquatic end by leaping off boats. The Romantic poet Shelley drowned in the Gulf of La Spezia, Italy. Depressed and thwarted by love, 32-year-old poet Hart Crane - whose estranged father had, by a cruel irony, invented Life Savers - apparently executed a superb swan dive off the stern of a steamship *Orizaba* into the Caribbean Sea in 1932, and was never found. A lifelong, obsessive swimmer, playwright Tennessee Williams's dying wish was that his remains enter the sea where Hart Crane had disappeared. Crane's own "monster in a box", a long, famous poem *The Bridge* took 7 years to write and might help explain his bout with the blues. Using the metaphor of Brooklyn Bridge - where I had visited earlier for a dip in the harbour - the 1930 poem is Crane's perkier version of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, and like Spalding's work, it grapples with 'a mystical synthesis of America'. Literary critics assert that Hart Crane

found apocalypse everywhere and he was preoccupied with ecstasy: Just like Spalding, soaring highs, and soul numbing lows.

Looking out over the water I thought about how Crane's line from *The Bridge* - "Among drifting chiming buoys - adrift." connects the extreme immersions of Woolf, Shelley, Crane and Gray. Spalding had talked about the chilling notion of 'a creative suicide'. Doing themselves in by water more or less solved the angst of these writers' unhappy lives, and really enhanced their reputations, one hundred percent.

Now, the Statue of Liberty was quite close. Rising out of the water, even though she's become a cliché, staring at her takes one's breath away. Who wouldn't contemplate a sense of hope and freedom, and feel a stirring in the soul?

Dale reached out and we nuzzled closer.

With so many gawking tourists, the ferry listed, and there was a perfect moment of collective panic, until the cameras were up again, clicking images of New York Harbour.

In beds, cars, beaches and most other places, Dale had become used to seeing me scribble notes in the pages of books. Even on our 1975 honeymoon in Antigua, I had annotated Dostoyevsky's grim, *Notes From the Underground*. On the ferry one of my fingers bookmarked in between pages 74 and 75 of *Life Interrupted*, where I'd underscored a paragraph concerning Spalding's terrible 2001 car accident in Ireland. A van had smashed into the car he was in with his wife and friends. Because Spalding hadn't done up his seatbelt, he was left with a titanium plate in his disfigured forehead, and a leg brace he would endure until he was pulled out of the East River. In the underlined passage, he ruminates about a depression that had set in after the morphine, and he didn't know how to discuss depression with the Irish. "I didn't know if they'd acknowledge the condition, or recognize it. I mean, does a fish know it's swimming in water?"

There are website lists of famous people who have seriously wrestled with depression. The lists are full of surprises. Speculating is half the fun, especially when one considers those who have contemplated oblivion: Sigmund Freud, Abe Lincoln, Robin Williams, Aristotle, Lady Di, Francis Ford Coppola, Michelangelo, Beethoven, Joan Rivers and Brooke Shields. Even

Gandhi once wrote: “If I had no sense of humour, I would have long ago committed suicide.”

Arriving at Staten Island was anticlimactic. As soon as we stopped, everyone lined up to shuffle off, and then lined up to get on another ferry for the free 25-minute trip back to Manhattan Island. The Staten Island Ferry plies New York Harbour 35,000 trips annually, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. At odd hours, Spalding often wandered on for a free ride, just to relax, and come to terms with his “monster in a box” reflections. And to be near water.

Everything about Spalding is overshadowed not just by his own suicide but the suicide of his mother. Kurt Vonnegut’s mother had also taken her own life, on Mother’s Day 1944. Vonnegut wrote about the Existential Hum, the uneasiness which keeps us moving, which never allows us to feel entirely at ease. Yet long into his old age Vonnegut had managed to keep himself and the world laughing. Spalding confronted the grim reaper through stage performances, endorphin-buzzing sports, and he had this wild-ass abandon that was pretty damned attractive. Life can be shit, but he seemed to suck the life out of the shit, and turn shit into art. Holding hands with Dale among strangers on a crowded ferry heading back to sunny New York City, and insulated from anything remotely close to oblivion, I imagined Spalding at a table on the boat deck, launching into a monologue, perhaps beginning with an outrageous opening line: “It was another perfect day to jump off the Staten Island Ferry.” Amid nervous laughter from the crowd he continued talking softly, intimately seducing everyone with words, setting himself and the audience free with bizarre, hilarious, tender riffs on whatever his imagination grabbed out of thin air. Then his voice would slowly increase in volume, building with outlandish connections, images, puns, theories, accusations, suggestions until it turned into a Hitler possessed foaming at the mouth rant of angry, perceptive, witty, brilliant words and gestures.

Spalding was the king of black humour. He could take anything and turn it into a memorable, sometimes unnerving joke. When a book reviewer of his novel *Impossible Vacation* complimented Spalding’s work as the best writing about sex and mental breakdown since Henry Miller and Sylvia Plath, Spalding’s comeback involved a motel room: Sylvia has her head in the oven and Miller is lifting her skirt from behind.

His most celebrated book, and film, *Swimming To Cambodia*, had an early cover with Spalding's head just above water, his bulging eyes inviting the viewer to share his crazy roller coaster quest for the perfect moment. *Swimming To Cambodia* involves the insanity of American foreign policy under Nixon, body surfing, swimming, what killed Marilyn Monroe, Spalding's acting role in the filming of *The Killing Fields* (which is about the bloodbath of the Khmer Rouge and genocide), Eastern and Western spirituality, raw sex, drugs, innocence, laughter and desire. A dedication at the beginning of the book expands in the mind: "To the Cambodians and Cambodia, a country beyond my imagination and much too far to swim to."

Always playful and profound, in *Swimming to Cambodia* he wrote: "I don't know what laughter is indicative of, but it has something to do with joy and letting go." Which is kind of what swimming is all about. Spalding's artful self-absorption wasn't narcissistic - it was a way of coping with and enjoying life. It was really about living in the moment, and doing such things as writing, swimming, walking, lovemaking, singing, and prayer.

Our free ride on the Staten Island Ferry was almost over. We were caught in a furtive surge of passengers crowding toward the gates of the docking area. Even though I had decided not to leap off the ferry, I still needed to swim with Spalding.

It was getting late, and I said to Dale, "Bear, Let's go to Coney Island."

She looked a bit worried, "Isn't the beach really crowded, and gross?"

"Let's go see."

So we funnelled off the ferry, elbowed our way through sweaty crowds, found the nearest subway station, and hurtled towards Coney Island.

Growing up near the sea at Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, Spalding had been hardwired into beach culture. He liked body surfing, swimming, and long brooding walks, looking over water to distant horizons. But as time went on, what he grew to crave and love even more were people. He was an A-plus student of the human condition, and New York had been the ultimate classroom.

New York City has over eight million people. From anywhere you can go by subway to Coney Island at the bottom of Brooklyn. In mid-twentieth-century

summers, a million bodies covered the three-mile stretch of beach. These days on a hot weekend it could swell to a couple of hundred thousand.

“Hang on Bear, this is going to test your humanity,” I said to Dale as we jostled among bodies streaming down to the boardwalk and heading back from the beach to the subway. We hurried past banners announcing the annual Mermaid Parade, and then a garish tent enclosure: *World's Smallest Woman Alive - 29 inches small. You talk to her. She talks to you! Educational.*

Things I'd come to associate with my favourite beaches - such as solitude, open spaces and breathable air - were non-existent at Coney Island. Getting closer to the beach, our noses were assailed by reheated fast foods, cotton candy, urine, sun tan lotion, sex on the hoof, and finally, that unmistakable, salty brine from breaking waves.

Reciting Homer and Shakespeare, poet Walt Whitman, who had lived much of his life on Long Island, romped naked along deserted stretches of this same beach. Spalding's rampant ego had been compared to a darker, latter-day Walt Whitman, whose famous first line, “I celebrate myself, I sing myself,” is pure Spalding. “In the grandest Walt Whitman sense, I'm full of contradictions,” Spalding had written.

Well, who isn't?

I could imagine Spalding on the beach sitting at a table, entertaining a sea of beachgoers, reciting lines from his monologue, 47 Beds which is about all the beds he had slept in.

Coney Island is often referred to as a poor man's paradise; today it looked more like a Third World refugee camp. It was getting late and the bulk of the crowds had already gone home, leaving behind piles of trash that overflowed around hundreds of garbage cans. People lined up at rusty outdoor showers, washing off sand, salt, and heat from sunburns. Down on the beach, I noticed a metal palm tree. A wonky Ferris wheel turned uncertainly against the sky.

“Jesus, what was that?” Dale yelled when we heard rapid gunfire.

It was a Shoot The Freak shooting gallery. A shirtless tattooed guy with a beer gut sold paint ball shots to gun down live human targets - five shots for

three dollars or seventy-five shots for twenty dollars. American flags flew everywhere. A scary-looking, middle-aged woman in oversized sunglasses and leopard-skin pants strode along the boardwalk toward us. Like an anorexic crow, she was skinny as all get out. Her flattened breasts, confined in a tank top, hung over her waistband. But, like all the tourists and locals at the beach, she was smiling and having a wonderful time. Given the notion that a beach is life on steroids, we enjoyed the carnival of misshapen old men, bikini-clad beauties, squalling babies, buff wannabe surfers, and beach volleyball players. There were drunks, loners, Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, Caribbean, Latino, Russian, African and Black American families of ma and pa and the kids, fat, skinny, tall, short, white, black, yellow, red, albino, sunburnt, almost-naked or fully-clothed people, in all that ravishing late day sunlight, spangling sea and golden sand. This wasn't poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of The Mind*, this was the real thing. Contrary to the popular myth that Coney Island was awful, it was fantastic, brimming with life and happy people.

"I'm goin' in Bear," I said, nodding towards the water.

I always wear a bathing suit under my jeans so I can whip 'em off for a quick dip anywhere. I led Dale among trash and sprawled bodies until we found a spot to leave our stuff. Nearby, a harried mother wrestled off her kids' undies, and shrieked, "Wudya just pee in the watah?"

Dale and I both grimaced.

We'd been touring New York City on the hottest day in July, in and out of subways, ferries, buses, art galleries and bookstores, humping heavy back packs filled with food, books, drinking water, and sweating like coal miners, and now among the multitudes of Coney Island all we wanted to do was dive into the ocean.

And Holy merciful God, all things considered, the water actually looked pretty inviting.

Hunkered down among local families and garbage, Dale politely declined to join me. I'll swim anywhere, anytime, in any water, whereas most people are a lot more selective. Everything has to be just right before they'll take the plunge. As usual, Dale graciously waved me off to play.

Things were perking up.

Decent-sized swells rolled in, and the tide was right for good body surfing waves.

So I hotfooted in the sand towards a gap in the water without too many swimmers, galloped into the shallows, then speared through the shore break, and swam underwater for as long as I could hold my breath. I surfaced, flipped over onto my back, looking up at the sky.

I couldn't have been happier. I was in the middle of New York City, and it was bloody amazing to have the taste of sea salt on my lips.

After catching a half-dozen body surfing waves, I floated out a little ways to savour the *perfect moment*. Spalding's car accident in Ireland and subsequent head and leg injury had left him at the mercy of a titanic depression that grew, and he couldn't shake it. Of course there's nothing sadder than what someone must be feeling when they decide to cash themselves in. Before the accident, though, Spalding mercilessly had his way with many taboo subjects, especially suicide. Online I had discovered a book called *The Layman's Guide to Suicide: The Essential Handbook Guaranteed to Make Any Problem a Laughing Matter*. I'm sure Spalding would have found this a hoot, and be excited someone was mining "his" theme.

Bouncing in the waves a few feet away was a curvaceous black woman with a very wet T-shirt.

In the refuse of the refugee camp on the beach, Dale wasn't having quite the same fun I was out in the water. So I had to calculate how far I could push my perfect moment at the expense of her imperfect one.

I caught the eyes of the woman in the wet T-shirt and those of the two boys she had in tow, just as a big swell rolled in. Then I stroked forward, windmilling my arms until I was taken by the momentum of the wave, and rode it in about ten metres. One of the boys made a megaphone out of his hands: "Hey Mister, how do you do that?" And I shouted, "Just watch."

I caught another couple of waves, and swam over to the boys. "You just gotta time it right," I said. "Look out at the horizon for your wave."

A smallish wave started breaking, and they all thrashed about, but I shook my head. “Wait till I say go. Okay?”

Another set of waves was approaching, and when a nice one was about to break, I said, “Go now. Swim like crazy.” The wave picked all three of them up and drilled them to the sandy bottom. Occasionally people drowned here in the undertow. But my novices surfaced, hooting and squealing. “Go for it,” I yelled. “Try some more waves.”

Spalding loved bodysurfing alone or with friends and family. Like a big kid, he spent hours in the water.

He would have been tickled pink knowing Obama, the American Presidential candidate who had been raised in Hawaii and was a kick-ass body surfer. Spalding wasn't so tickled about being caught by the old, fasten-your seatbelt bit - If he had worn a seat belt, perhaps he wouldn't have been so badly injured, and he wouldn't have become lame and depressed. At 62-years-of-age he wouldn't have been ready to call it quits.

In 1999, two years before the van in Ireland smashed into Spalding, Stephen King had also been hit by a van near his home in Maine, where he walked four miles each day to savour and work out the demons of his writing. A year later, King published a tongue-in-cheek book, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, though he does some of that (what writer doesn't?), he outlines the story of his life, and teaches the reader what he has learned about writing: quite simply, you must read a lot and write a lot. Confronting his bitterness about the accident that nearly killed him and dropkicked him into a dark depression, he emphasized that writing was a way back to life. Unfortunately, Spalding didn't have Stephen King's spirit. His brain had been damaged by the accident, and he couldn't pull himself out of the depression.

The woman and her boys were safely catching waves in the shore break. I breaststroked farther out where the waves were not breaking and floated in undulating swells, taking in the magnificent view. In *Swimming to Cambodia*, Spalding found himself out with the sharks in the middle of the Indian Ocean, out farther than he had ever been: “Suddenly, there was no time and there was no fear and there was no body to bite. There were no longer any outlines. It was just one big ocean. My body had blended with the ocean. And there was just this round, smiling-ear-to-ear pumpkin-head perceiver on top, bobbing up and down.” After being blown away by his

time in the waves, Spalding was sad because he knew he'd had a perfect moment and he would have to go home.

On a day-to-day basis in his life and his art - to riff off Shakespeare - Spalding was able to “move wild laughter in the throat of death.” His gift for soul-baring, creative self expression came a long time before the age we're in now where many have dived headfirst into the artless craft of online self-exposure.

After all his jokes, his self doubts, and desires, Spalding Gray's perfect moments were always there right in front of him, one after another, manifest in the friends and family he loved, and his connection with water. There's nothing unique or hard about the search for the perfect moment - it's only a metaphor, and in many ways it is “the” metaphor that motivates us all and sustains life. Like most funny people, Spalding would be the first to confess that much humour comes from pain, and for most of his life he had helped other people find solace through laughter. He summed it up in two short sentences: “Humour. The bottom line.”

As the sun set and evening descended, even as Dale waited, way beyond the end of her sweet patience, and as thousands of people were returning home from their own perfect moments at the beach, I swam out into deep water. Arm over arm in a long powerful freestyle, I knew I could probably swim all the way to Cambodia.

