

[Home](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

# My Juliette Binoche

*by Jane Anne Staw*

It happened again this week. After nearly two days of rain, the sun had finally emerged from behind the clouds, when I went out for an afternoon walk. Behind the shift in weather, I was still feeling glum—not from the two days of rain alone, but from an accumulation of small stresses that the hard rain had exacerbated. That evening I was to teach my last workshop of a semester that had been problematic at first, and I found myself worrying about the outcome of our final meeting. Although our sessions had been improving by the week, it felt imperative to end on a positive note. What could I do to ensure a happy ending? Or was the outcome out of my control?

When I finally noticed the dramatic shift in the light, I felt my spirits lifting, the way they do when you receive a bit of good news or recognize a beloved voice on the other end of the telephone. I began to feel gently buoyant. As I looked up toward the sky to confirm the disappearance of storm clouds, from behind me, I heard the whirr of bicycle wheels approaching, and within seconds, a young woman, who looked a great deal like Juliette Binoche—even before she spoke-- turned as she arrived alongside me. "Eet ees sooo buuuuteefuul!" she trilled. . Then, before I could respond, she had pedaled past me.

Yes, it is, I thought to myself, watching her tiny figure recede; it is indeed beautiful. And for the first time on the walk, I took in the brilliance of the sun and the sparkling clarity of the sky washed clean from two days of rain.

Walking the remaining few blocks of my afternoon route, I held the image of my Juliette Binoche close to my heart, where she cast light on all that had been prickling me during the rain. I needn't worry about the last workshop, I realized. Over the course of the semester, its members had worked hard to become better readers of their fellow writers' work. Their response papers now contained insightful comments and penetrating questions. Equally important, the class had opened up to each other, the initial diads and triads relaxing to embrace new members, what had become the traditional seating pattern now shifting from week to week. There was no question about it, we had become a community of writers who offered the best of ourselves when we sat down to read each other's work.

By the time I pulled out from in front of my house to make the drive across the Bay Bridge, I anticipated the upcoming workshop with relish. At the end of the class, I would compliment my students, let them know how much I appreciated what they had achieved. They too would benefit from my Juliette Binoche, a chance and fleeting encounter—could I even call it that?—that had illuminated my entire day.

I recall another momentary encounter, one morning several months ago, when driving home from an errand, I had turned onto a small street not far from my house, and a woman at the corner, waiting in her Subaru to turn

---

left, had caught my eye and smiled. I smiled in return, my smile in no way perfunctory, but a response arising from the deepest cavities of my heart. No matter that doctors and scientists might tell me that this emotion had very little to do with my heart and much more with my brain, the response I felt definitely arose within my chest, as intensely as the feelings of love for Stephen that flare within me from time to time.

How often we go about our lives disconnected, brushing past the people we come into contact with. We might offer an absent-minded nod, a flicker of a smile, but these responses, which can take place just on the edge of our consciousness, do not involve us with the people we nod or smile to in any significant way. Like a dusting of snow we quickly brush off our overcoats, the contact dissipates almost as soon as it was initiated.

Not so with the driver of the Subaru and with my Juliette Binoche. I can still see them both, in moments that transcend time, the driver's shoulder-length gray hair, her gloved hands resting on the steering wheel, her full smile; and Juliette's tiny torso twisting about on her bicycle seat as she turned to speak with me. Each time I conjure these moments, I feel a prickle of warmth within my chest, the woman who smiled and Juliette Binoche guardian angels I can summon at times of distress.

For as long as I can remember, I have struggled with fears of abandonment and exclusion. After my brother was born, I dreamed that while our house burned, my parents rode off on horseback, my mother holding my brother in her arms, as I watched from a second-story window. Later, during high school, I spent many nights wandering in my dreams among groups of girls who excluded me from their circles and conversations. Once I graduated from college, my nightmares often involved returning to the campus, unacknowledged by students who had once been my friends and unable to locate my dorm room.

My friend Eva recently suggested that perhaps these dreams were about something as profound as life and death. Evolutionary psychology, she told me, has explored the importance for women of membership in the village group, particularly while the men are off hunting. In such situations, the women depend upon one another for their very lives, and any woman who was excluded faced the possibility of death. "Your dreams mean that you're just closer to your evolutionary roots," she assured me.

I liked Eva's explanation. It released me from the humiliation my recurring dreams cause me. Aren't I too old to fear exclusion and abandonment? My parents are still alive, I've raised a son, and have an intimate marriage with Steve; why are my dreams so regressive? Now I understand that for centuries, all women have, if at an unconscious level, feared exclusion. I am not pathetic; I am simply a reflection of my gender's deepest history.

For several years I spent my summers in a converted one-room school house in the Amish country outside Iowa City. The setting was idyllic, atop a hill overlooking the surrounding farmland, the fields planted in rows of corn and soy, the days as peaceful as the lowing of the cattle and sheep, the clomping of the horses' hooves on the gravel road just outside the house, as they pulled the carriages of the Amish to the tiny store just up the

---

---

road. Nights were quiet and star studded.

A truly idyllic setting, where very little ever disturbed our peace. But one summer I heard stories of a shunning, and my dreams of abandonment and exclusion intensified. I no longer remember what the shunned man had done to deserve his punishment. Or perhaps the cause of this extreme reaction on the part of the community was considered private and I never knew. The reasons behind the exclusionary behavior were not as important to me as knowing that nobody from the community, not even the man's own extended family, was to acknowledge him—in public or privately. If anybody saw him on the street or in town, they were instructed to turn their head to ensure that no sign of recognition be expressed.

My friends in the Amish community didn't like the concept of shunning. And they certainly found the practice painful. But they obeyed their church and their elders, and did their part in rendering the shunned man invisible. I heard later that the man had a breakdown as a result of the shunning. Well, of course! Cutting off a person's connection to community is withholding food for the soul. The community had starved this man to the point of breakdown.

Women, then, are not alone. While they may have evolved to fear exclusion from the group as a death sentence, men are equally vulnerable to emotional isolation. Nobody can survive abandonment and prolonged psychological cruelty. Perhaps that is why I respond so intensely to small encounters, why communications as minute as exchanged smiles and momentary greetings fill me with such sweet happiness, why they illuminate the rest of my day. If I experience my membership in community as fragile, if I struggle against the tide of abandonment so fiercely, a stranger's smile, the ecstatic words of a cyclist passing by, are lifelines, drawing me back into the group, into the society of the village, into life. You are not alone, these encounters tell me. You are not alone and you are safe.

---

**Jane Anne Staw** teaches in the M.F.A. in Writing Program at the University of San Francisco. As a teacher, she cares deeply about helping her students create an intimate relationship with their writing. As a writer, she is passionate about the possibilities of nonfiction writing, from personal essays to pieces that defy categorization. Along with individual essays in various literary magazines, she, with Mary Swander, has published *Parsnips in the Snow: Talks with Midwestern Gardeners* (1990, University of Iowa Press) and more recently *Unstuck: A Supportive and Practical Guide to Working Through Writer's Block* (2003, St. Martin's). To get copies of her work, click this [Amazon link](#).

---

**Copyright 2011, Jane Anne Staw.** © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.