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The Water Is Wide

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Perspective

The Water Is Wide

A successful swim means staying atop the surface, but the ritual of swimming goes much deeper.

BY MELINDA J. MENZER

The Talmud tells us that parents are responsible for teaching our children three things: we must teach them Torah, we must teach them a trade, and we must teach them how to swim.

Why are these the things we must ensure our children know? We teach them Torah so that they may live good lives. We teach them a trade so that they may make a living. And we teach them to swim so that they may live.

People frequently use swimming as a metaphor for life. Consider Dory's words in *Finding Nemo*: "Just keep swimming, just keep swimming." That quotation appears everywhere, from T-shirts to tattoos; it's become a way of saying "Keep going" in any situation. Lynn Sherr, in *Swim: Why We Love the Water*, notes that we often use the language of swimming to talk about life: "Getting nowhere? You're treading water . . . How many times have you talked about 'sticking a toe in' or 'diving off the deep end' or finding yourself 'in over your head'?"

But as Sherr herself notes, swimming is not just a metaphor for life—it is life, life made quiet, life made clear. In a 2014 piece in *The New York Times*, Bonnie Tsui describes how swimming helps us find ourselves in a loud, overly insistent world:

"The medium makes it necessary to unplug; the blunting of the senses by water encourages internal retreat. Though we don't all reach nirvana when we swim, swimming may well be that last refuge from connectivity—and, for some, the only way to find the solitary self."

I, like others, need that regular, internal retreat. I have arranged my life around the open hours of the Furman pool. Those pool hours are sacred; they are my Shabbat.

On bad days, when everything has gone wrong and I am vibrating at a frequency that can be heard by dogs, I go to the pool and swim 36 repeats of 100 yards on 1:40. It's two miles, it takes exactly 60 minutes, and it clears the mind of everything. A swim like that is the hard reset, it's the mikveh—it washes you clean, so you can start again.

In "Birches," Robert Frost writes, "I'd like to get away from earth awhile/And then come back to it and begin over." The time I swim is the most productive hour of my day; I find the solution to the complicated problem, the words for the difficult situation. When I get out of the water, I can begin over.

I love swimming at the Furman pool. It's my Cheers, the place where everybody knows my name. They expect me at noon; if I show up at six a.m. instead, Glenn at the fitness center desk will say, "You must have a lunch meeting."

I love swimming in open water, too. I've swum the Alcatraz swim, which bills itself as "the ultimate escape," but every swim is an escape, either from or to. Open water swimming is also a lesson in humility. For those of us who believe ourselves indispensable—women (and men) who do too much—a swim in open water is a reminder that the world can get by without us for a while. In the middle of Lake Hartwell or Lake Jocasee, the sky is huge, the water is wide, and I am small. Swimming puts you in your place.

And yet, when you are swimming a long way in a large body of water, something paradoxical happens. Diana Nyad, having swum from Cuba to Florida on her fifth attempt, expressed that paradox in her first exhausted words on the beach: "I have three messages. One is we should never, ever give up. Two is you never are too old to chase your dreams. Three is it looks like a solitary sport, but it's a team."

Nyad's first two messages are standard inspirational fare: don't give up, just keep swimming. It is her third that resonates with me because I have found it surprisingly true. At the same time that swimming is a way to find the solitary self, it is also a way to remember our essential connectedness. Far from land, small and surrounded by water and sky, a swimmer must rely on her team.

In July 2014, I swam a 10-mile race in Lake Minnetonka, Minnesota—five miles across the lake and five miles back. It's fulfilling to swim across a lake and back. I highly recommend it. It feels complete. And yet there's no way around it: A 10-mile swim is hard. It takes a long time.

A swim like that takes a team. I had a kayaker with me and friends and family waiting on shore. One of those friends swam with me when we were children, through years of swim team practices and summers in the lake at Girl Scout camp. She was undergoing chemotherapy that summer, treatments every two weeks. She flew to Minnesota on an off-week to support me. There's nothing you can do to earn that kind of love. She just gave it to me. She was standing on shore waiting for me.

There is a point in every long swim when it feels as if you'll never make it to the finish. I hit that point about four hours in. It would have been hard to keep going alone. But I was not alone. I had a team. They were waiting on shore for me. And when I was out of strength, I thought of my friend, the strongest and bravest person I have ever known, and I swam it in. I swam it in on the strength of her love.

The power of swimming is that while it allows us to unplug from the everyday, it also connects us to the transcendent. There is no solitary sport; it always takes a team.

We swim out so that we may swim back in. F

ABOUT THE AUTHOR *Melinda J. Menzer is a professor in the department of English. She came to Furman in 1996 after receiving her B.A. from Williams College and her master's and PhD degrees from the University of Texas at Austin. Menzer teaches linguistics and medieval literature, as well as a May Experience course called* Why We Swim. *This essay is dedicated to Carey Elizabeth Fitzmaurice, 1968–2015*