

Finding Myself in the Water Life Lessons in the Pool

N. Rosenberg, Keepers of the Flame Retreat, June 2011

We've been "finding our place at the fire".... This is my story about my *finding myself in the water*.

For the last 5 years, I've been fulfilling a life long dream.... To swim and breathe in the deep water.

When I was 10 years old, I had to be fished out of the deep water... because I couldn't breathe or tread water. This led to my fear, deep and lifelong, of not being able to breathe in deep water.

Five years ago, I was doing a one-to-one with a CEO, who happened to be head of the largest aquatic center in New York City, and we could see the Olympic swimming pool from her office. It came up in conversation that I had this lifelong fear re: swimming, and she offered me a great gift: 3 complimentary swim lessons with a teacher. I thought about it for few seconds and decided this was my opportunity to overcome my deep fear, and I accepted.

Then I decided to make a bigger commitment... i.e. I started working with a *master* swim teacher, someone who has spent decades training Olympic swimmers as well as babies and people with fears like mine. He also teaches meditation and tai chi... and he has the wisdom and patience to work with me. I set no timetable, I just wanted to reach my goal of being able to swim and breathe in the deep water – it didn't matter how long it took. So, every Saturday and Sunday (except when I'm traveling), for the past 5 years, I've been taking swim lessons.

What I've been learning is much more: *life lessons...swimming in the pool became a metaphor for swimming in life*. My teacher taught me:

1. BE LIKE THE WATER.... Trust in it, feel what's going on it, move with it.
2. FOCUS ON THE FORWARD QUADRANT (the upper half of the body)... the arms propelling me forward, the legs just for stability, support and balance, flutter kicking gently and not wasting energy.
3. BE FOCUSED, MEDITATIVE, CENTERED, RELAXED.... So I can just *move forward like a bullet*.
4. LEAVE EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE BEHIND.... Leave it in the locker room or outside the pool... *to avoid drag or resistance that keeps me from moving forward like a bullet*.

My teacher said the words "trying" and "working" are not in the swimming vocabulary... this is about being relaxed and moving easy.

Last year, in my fourth year of swimming lessons, while I was swimming but hadn't ventured yet into the deep water, a little miracle happened –something beautiful that helped me heal from my childhood experience, helped me chip away more at my fear and move further forward.

At a Vistage Chairs conference, I went for a swim in the shallow hotel pool at 8pm, when there was no lifeguard and only one other person in the pool – a little girl about 10 years old (her mother was sitting outside the pool watching her). The girl was splashing and playing in the water, while I was swimming back and forth in 4 feet of water. I noticed that she was watching me. Then she came over to me and asked,

“CAN YOU TEACH ME HOW TO SWIM LIKE YOU?”

My heart stopped... I knew what this meant to me.

So I spent a half hour teaching her some of what I learned.... She said she had trouble with the breathing, and I showed her the sequence.... First float, then add the kicking, then the arms, and last the breathing.....

She will never know that she did way more for me than I did for her.

Last December, I was finally able to swim in the deep water – peacefully.

It's still a journey for me, probably lifelong. My next goal is to be able to swim in the middle lane of the deep water.... Without railings, supports and the wall.

So how does all this relate to NOW and FUTURE for me? For you?

In the second half of life, we venture into deeper waters, and we choose:

1. HOW WE ARE IN THE WATER
2. WHERE WE SWIM AND WITH WHOM
3. WHETHER WE SWIM WITH OR WITHOUT BAGGAGE
4. WHETHER WE MOVE LIKE A BULLET FORWARD or have drag that slows us down
5. WHETHER WE EVEN WANT TO GO INTO DEEPER WATERS OR STAY SAFE AND COMFORTABLE WHERE WE ARE....

I want you to work in a triad and consider, first silently and individually, and then in discussion, these questions:

For what purpose am I living in the second half of my life?

What is my reason for being? for others? for myself?

What do I need to let go of in order to reclaim my purpose?

What conversations do I want to leave behind, as part of my legacy?