

Shedding the Life Jacket

I have finally learned to swim -- an accomplishment that makes my 55-year-old heart quicken with joy. Since grade school, I've dreamed of swimming; but, in the landlocked South Carolina town where I grew up, brown skinned children were barred from public pools, and my morbid fear of snakes kept me out of the muddy ponds and creeks that provided the only alternative.

The summer I was 17, I left the south to work in the kitchen of an exclusive girl's camp in Vermont. Part of the lure of the job was the camp's brochure touting its beautiful lake, where I was certain I would learn to swim. Upon arrival, I learned that the help wasn't allowed to swim in the lake. The next summer, I signed up for lessons at a public park near my sister's Washington, DC home. The handsome young teacher beckoned me to jump into the pool and move my arms and legs to keep afloat. I hit the water with a splash, then panicked. Choking and sputtering, I sank to the bottom - certain I was drowning. They quickly pulled me out, but the terror I felt followed me to college, where I wrangled a medical excuse to avoid the mandatory swim class.

But I wasn't afraid of the water. My astrological sign, Pisces -- symbolized by two fish swimming in opposite direction -- illustrated my dilemma: I was drawn to the water but repelled by fears of drowning in it. On a trip to Barbados, after watching a catamaran skim along the shoreline, I waded out for a ride with its young owner who assured me that he never tipped over. On that flimsy craft, I was as close to the water as possible, without actually being in it.

In my 40's, I enrolled in a swim class at my town pool and learned to float. However, each time I put my face in the water, I reflexively inhaled and choked. A few months ago, my health club unveiled a state-of-the-arts aquatics' center, and my desire to swim re-surfaced as I watched children frolic in the water. I voiced my longing to my husband Bob, and he suggested I take private lessons. The Club's pool manager listened sympathetically as I expressed my fears, and suggested that in preparation for my lessons, I practice putting my face in the shower stream while humming to keep water out of my nasal passages. It felt silly, but it worked!

Then suddenly, my favorite niece died. Her loss, coupled with the tragedy of September 11, brought me as close to depression as I have ever been. Bob suggested that physical exercise might help. Despite my protests, the day after we returned from her funeral, he dragged me off to Club Fit where I reluctantly stepped into the shallow, warm water pool for my first lesson. The teacher, Cheryl, was young enough to be my daughter. "I'm going to teach you to play in the pool," she said. "Once you get comfortable, you'll learn you to swim."

As I floated in the warm water, my tears went unnoticed. Cheryl suggested goggles would allow me to open my eyes and increase my security. They did, and I soon learned to tread water and retrieve items from the pool floor. Suspended in the dead man's float, I relinquished my perceived hold over the world, and made peace with things I could not change. Still, I clung to my blue kick board for safety, while I struggled to master the slow kick that Cheryl said would propel me across the pool. Thrice weekly practice sessions finally brought success, followed by mastery of the modified backstroke. Elated, I swam back and forth until my fingers shriveled. When Cheryl had me push off without my kick board and glide, face down, through the water like a mermaid, I sank to the bottom and came up gasping for air. But my nose was dry! Several practice sessions later, I relaxed, and marveled as the water carried me along with the smallest of leg movements.

Today, I swam half the length of the pool before coming up for air. After I can swim it's entire length, I'll be ready for the Lap Pool where I envision myself diving into the water, and swimming from end to end. But first, I need to buy a new bathing suit. Mine is now a bit shabby. And anyway, a two piece is hardly suitable for a serious swimmer like me.