

Swimming: A Meditation by Lynne Golodner

When I was little, I rode on my father's back while he swam the length of our neighbor's pool in one breath. My legs gripping his sides, my arms waving in the wind, I tilted my head back and laughed as he pulled me through the water. The pool seemed impossibly long, and I could not imagine holding my breath the whole distance the way my father did. He carried me from the depths to the shallows, where I climbed off and he rose out of the water like a great whale's tail, shaking drops from his face, his grin as wide as mine. I believed he could do anything.

Four years ago, after my father was diagnosed with an incurable blood cancer, I sought the pool as refuge. When I sat at home on the couch, silent tears trailed down my face and I shuddered into the angsty anticipation of a world without him. In the pool, I couldn't cry. Once, tears overcame me in the middle of a swim, and I fought to breathe, stopping mid-lane and treading water to regain control. Crying ruined my rhythm and made me choke on chlorine, and I lost count of how many laps I'd completed.

My father swam backstroke at Mumford High School in the 1950s. One year for Halloween, I wore his robin's egg blue and burgundy varsity sweater, and all the parents smiled when they saw me, sharing memories as they dropped candy into my plastic pumpkin. I didn't think about my dad as an athletic star until he was dying though, when we had long conversations in his hospital room about the places he'd been and the things he'd accomplished. We hadn't swum together in years and we no longer could (with the port in his chest for infusions, a public pool could have killed him), so I settled for collecting his stories.

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I've always found water soothing – being by its side, watching its tempestuous emotions, immersing in its cold embrace. The big gusty gales of Lake Michigan. The swift current of the Detroit River. The mirror-like surface of my old next-door neighbor's pool, ready to absorb our summertime squeals and childhood energy. The ocean more powerful than what I imagine God to be, its strong hands reaching up and out, slapping the sand and peacefully retreating. Our bodies are mostly water, even our bones. We need water to survive and, in a way, it needs us too. We begin floating and throughout our lives water symbolizes purity, fertility, life and renewal. But equally as much, water has long been a symbol of wisdom, power, grace. Essential for existence and cleansing, water has the power to change us and to bless. Some ancient cultures saw water as chaos, but I see it as deliverance. As much as its power can overwhelm, it gives me power that I desperately need.

Water is beautiful. Its movements, its elegant glow, its translucency, the rainbows it inspires when interacting with light at the right angles. I love to watch a rain drop on a blade of grass or a river cascade over rocks. I love the sound of water. I love the way it feels when I am in it, the way it holds me, allows me to be lighter than I am on land.

But I didn't always seek reassurance in the waves. I am not a lifelong competitive swimmer, nor a person home-birthed into a tub. I come from very mundane and ordinary roots. The pool only became my refuge when I was divorcing the father of my three children who were aged four, three, and one at the time. My work was

imploding—the economic downturn caused so many of the magazines I had been writing for to halt publication or shutter completely. I went from earning six-figures as a freelance writer to desperately searching for people to hire me to write for a few hundred dollars at a time. And I wouldn't be getting much from my soon-to-be ex-husband, an Orthodox Jewish musician whose earning potential was limited because his faith prevented him from performing on Fridays and Saturdays.

A week after we signed the divorce judgment, my ex moved his boxes and suitcases out of our house. I sat on the carpeted steps while my kids watched *Sesame Street* in the family room. The big house was all mine with its stone façade and two-car garage, my daughter's pink bedroom, the 1960s blue-tiled bathroom, the oak-floored living room, the 1980s kitchen with Formica counters and laminate cabinets, the basement that flooded in a hard rain. We had bought it at the height of the market and now at the housing industry's lowest point, I couldn't even sell the house to pocket the proceeds. I was stuck with a mortgage to pay, lights and heat to keep on, a refrigerator to fill. For months, hoping to leverage my skills into a career pivot, I'd been looking for companies to hire me to write press releases and blogs. Some had signed on, but the CEO of my biggest client, a family-owned grocery chain, said my business idea was stupid. I wondered how I was going to make it.

Months later, when I had three clients and income to cover the mortgage and utilities, I scraped together enough money to join a health club with outdoor and indoor pools. Many afternoons I took the kids to the club, leaving them in childcare for an hour so I could swim laps alone, then picking them up and swimming with them until they grew tired under the sun. The laps grounded me and reminded me to breathe, assured me that I could float in choppy waters. The time splashing with my children in the zero-edge kiddie pool showed me that I could work hard and have time to play. We would keep each other afloat. Those sun-lit days playing in the water with my children, I felt lucky. I was forging a path for us and I even had time and space for fun on a hot day. Once, as we carried buckets and pool toys and bottles of sunscreen from the car to the club, my older son Asher asked why I had to swim alone before we could all swim together. I couldn't tell him that if I didn't swim, I might crumble in front of him. Instead I said, "It makes me a happier Mommy," and that answer seemed to suffice.

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I never worried about money until I became a single mother. Then, I needed a safe car large enough for three car seats, clothing, winter coats, and sturdy boots for my children. They outgrew everything within months and their hearty appetites demanded three nutritious meals a day, plus snacks, and sippy cups full of juice. One day in the not-so-distant future, they would need thick textbooks, sports equipment, SAT tutors, college tuition.

The money was a literal need, but it became a symbolic one too, representing my value, my success. No matter how much clients paid me, it was never enough for me to feel secure. In the year after the divorce the notion of enough grew big and scary, a monster in the night looming over me as I tossed in bed. I called my father at least once a week asking for advice and seeking reassurance that I would land enough clients, that I could keep them. My father had created a company when I was ten. At the time he had three young children too, but my mother stayed home to raise us so he could go out and build a name for himself in the scrap metal industry. I had no fallback, no one to keep the home front going while I went out into the world.

"Take the money and do the work," he said. "It'll all work out." A simple truth, that if I completed the work in front of me, I'd always have work to do. His advice was tangible and immediate. A job well done was the best way to ensure more jobs. Focusing on an unknown future took me out of the moment and away from delivering on any project. It tied me in knots I had a hard time climbing free from.

I loved the sound of my father's voice when he answered the phone and realized it was me: "Hi, Linnie!" he'd exclaim, as if my call was a highlight of his day. It certainly was for me. He didn't say much about the specifics

of my fears, just reassured me that if I kept showing up and doing well, I'd be ok. He never worried and his voice calmed me, like the undulating waves of the pool do now. After he was diagnosed, I started saving his messages so I could listen to him long after he was gone.

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My company grew and I gained more clients, developing a niche in the yoga world, where I helped studios and yoga personalities build brands, land TV interviews, and create social media content. Before I made the pool my sanctuary, under the guidance of one of my clients, I tried mindfulness meditation. I bought a Back Jack chair to put on the floor and left my desk twice a day to close my eyes and breathe in and out through my nose. I'd stare at the place where my third eye was supposed to be, trying to escape the papers cluttered around my computer, the oversight my employees required and the ongoing worry of whether I could retain clients while trying to attract more.

Meditation worked for a while. I grew calmer about managing my small staff and less concerned about money. But I fell out of practice. In the midst of work and home, too many demands competed for attention. I had to leave the scene of chaos to step into calm.

In a Michigan winter, it takes effort to drive icy roads, face the biting wind, peel off my clothes, and plunge into waiting waters. But still, I go. On a busy day, when there are more demands than minutes to devote to them, I go. When my children pull at me, beg me to sit with them on the couch, I promise to sit later, after I swim. The water beckons and I respond. My anchor, my sustenance

I love the equanimity of swimming. The water welcomes me, like a lover, and I give myself over to its embrace. For the first fifteen laps, worries clutter my mind, shouting: *my contract might be threatened, that client isn't happy, will any publication take my writing?* Tick-tick-tick: looming deadlines and endless to-dos. Soon, they will leave and silence will settle in, the rhythm of my body in the water, the peace of the pace. With every stroke I am reaching for the inevitable calm.

I fill my lungs and push off from the wall. I part the waters, my legs fluttering. My hands are cups filling and emptying. I point my toes and tap my heels to complete a stroke. *There's no place like the pool.* Focusing on form lets the worries bubble up and float away. I breathe out of my nose, my skin pulses.

In breaststroke, my arms extend like eagle's wings before coming together at my heart and pushing forward. Back stroke and free style are long-limbed and reaching, exposing the heart. Even butterfly, which I rarely swim, is an open-arm hug before an elegant crashing into the water. In swimming I become expansive, open to everything, full of love for this moment, full of understanding for all the complications in and around me. I become an observer, not a judge.

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In high school, swim class was mandatory for ninth graders. The gym teacher handed out brown, starchy swimsuits that were washed every night in abrasive industrial detergent. We clipped the straps together with a barrette to keep them from falling down. When my oldest son Asher was in high school, he swam against my alma mater, and my mother, father, and I watched from the bleachers. The pool seemed half the size it was in the 1980s. In my memory I treaded water, staring up at bleachers that rose like mountains of creaking seats the gym teacher traversed, shouting instructions. Asher was not a fast swimmer, but he took whatever the coach threw at him. Once, forced into the 500, the longest and hardest event in the competition, he finished last. I watched with a knotted stomach, nervous that all eyes were on my boy. I admired his resolve to plow through

one lap at a time, as if no one were there, immersed in the water's lulling support. The natatorium shimmered with cheering. After, he and my dad commiserated about what it felt like to compete in the pool. Although all eyes were on them, they lost themselves in the rhythm of the strokes. It was as if the rest of the world fell away. I knew exactly what they meant.

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With every length, my worries have less energy and I have more. Twenty lengths in, my mind quiets. Until I reach my rhythm, I negotiate with myself to keep going: *Another ten lengths. If you want to quit at thirty, fine.* But I never quit. Once I am submerged, I stay. After thirty lengths, it's all freestyle, long and gliding. Worries are little birds flying away without sound. *Safe travels, little creatures – go find light and warmth.*

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I spent two years watching my father die. When his life finally ended on a dark, windy day, I thought, *I spend my life waiting and then death comes to the door. There is no better time for anything.*

I'd been wanting to visit the Keys for years. I yearned to leave the gray cold, short days and ice-cruised streets for slow beach strolls, an unlimited horizon and the cool reassurance of a shimmering pool, a kiss of sweet air on my skin. I drove lonely, two-lane roads under bright sun, crossing long and narrow bridges stringing islands together until I arrived in the tropical refuge of a seaside resort. I chose Cheeca Lodge in Islamorada because it had a lap pool. I could swim in the milky dawn counting lengths by the clicking of insects

Breathing in the winter can be painful – each inhale burns and harsh wind bites exposed skin, turning it red and raw. I needed to be in a place where it didn't hurt to breathe, where I could bare my skin and feel the sun seep in quietly, kindly. It was more than a literal winter that February. The weeks after my father died were the darkest time of my life

I loved those early mornings flip-flopping across asphalt, past the golf course where sprinklers *switch-switch-switched*, all peaceful silence and reverence for the rising day. The air was cool, like the water. I was the only one in the pool that early, the morning whispering reassurances like my father used to. With each lap, I felt more certain that I could continue on without him, even if I didn't want to.

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The water and I, we are close. I push and it pushes me back. I glide and it holds me. It molds around my body and I let it comfort me. I breathe out as long as I can until there is no air left. I am a buoy in a constant current. I cannot sink no matter how hard I try.

When I finish the longest part of my set, steam rises from my skin and I duck under to cool my face. The drumbeat of music in the speakers is as rhythmic as the waves. I can't make out words and I don't really want to. Children squeal and splash, old people float in the shallows, a marathoner in the next lane pounds up and down the lane. Everything is happening around me and the worries I brought to the pool have long since floated away. Everything that felt heavy, draining, is simple in the haze from the water. The world is an unimportant blur.

My main set done; I proceed through my last twenty-two lengths to hit my mile. I alternate strokes, slow my pace. In my water cocoon, I watch bubbles become blinking stars in a night sky.

I've swum three or four times a week for more than a decade now and I sought refuge in a pool long before that. But only in the past few years have I realized that, in the pool, I find the comfort and support my father gave me. Swimming infuses me with strength, clarity, and determination like my conversations with Dad. I no longer need to hear his words to know everything will be alright. In the absence of his voice, I listen to my own.

I finish every swim with side stroke, a kindness to my weary self. Goggles off, I lay my head in the water as if it is my father's palm. My hands and legs scissor in opposite directions. Water gurgles in my ear. And when I rise from the pool, sparkling drops drip off of me, my hair shaking out from its cap molding. I am the great whale's tail, inhabiting the space my father used to occupy with his single-breath strength – I am carrying the little girl to safety.

