



Reflections in Pools

My wife Kaye is always looking out for my health. She'd like to see me spending less time sitting on the living room couch. So she signed me up with a nearby senior fitness club, featuring an excellent 75-foot-long pool. Kaye does aqua-aerobics classes, and I'm there nearly every morning to swim laps, while classic rock from the Sixties echoes from the PA system.

A pool full of seniors presents unique challenges. Invariably, four or five people are bobbing across the water like WWII German naval mines in a British harbor. We lap swimmers must navigate around them, or signal our course to avoid collisions. If the timing is right, one of us can score the coveted single lane, cordoned off by floating safety rope.

At first I thought Ha! Most of these people aren't moving very fast. They're just here to float around and talk. I'm the only one here getting real exercise.

That was before I met the 90-year-old man who swims 20 laps a day without any breaks. That's 40 pool lengths—3,000 feet! A woman, I'm guessing a few years my senior, is often doing laps when I get there and still swimming when I leave. Some people prefer groups and classes. Others prefer to do their own thing, treading water or paddling around with noodles. Some who have had recent injuries, operations or heart conditions may be pushing the envelope just to get in the water, slowly building their strength back. Everyone in the pool has a different story.

This pool is in sharp contrast with one where I had a lot of fun in the mid-1960s. On an island in the Columbia River near Portland, Oregon, the 123-acre Jantzen Beach Amusement Park boasted multiple pools that could accommodate 2,000 swimmers a day—many of them young people celebrating their physical attributes. A platform atop a 25-foot diving tower was always packed with teenage guys daring each other to jump. Of course I took the leap—a cannonball—because I had to prove something. My sinuses drained for two days.

Fifty-five years later, here in the senior pool, these kinds of activities are not happening. People are performing what is necessary to keep their hearts pumping and their joints functional. The only competition, if any, is with one's self.

Seems crazy to combine the two kinds of pools—but isn't that the reality for the Great Spiritual Pool in which we're all swimming? At one end are the people who have something to prove, and that's okay. There's a lot of fun, hollering and raucous activity down there. But as we make our way toward the other end, things change. I'm not saying septuagenarians can't be ambitious, overly competitive, or even tyrannical (business, politics and religion prove otherwise). It's just that, from my standpoint, most of us on this end have begun to calm down a little. We don't mind floating. To paraphrase Harvard developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, authentic relationships are more realizable in later years, after such things as competition, posturing and institutionalism have been laid aside.

What about lifeguards? At Jantzen Beach, lifeguards were everywhere, mostly putting a lid on running, rowdiness and risky behavior. In my senior pool, that's just not necessary. Cameras watch for the rare emergency.

At the Great Spiritual Pool, there is definitely a Lifeguard, but he's often stealthier than we would like. Many swimmers don't even realize he's there. He doesn't always rescue us from our foolhardiness, and the reality is that none of us get out of the pool alive (the folks at the senior end of the pool are coming to grips with that fact). But when his friends in the pool reach out to help others and express his love, that's when the Lifeguard becomes seen.

He is, after all, our Eternal Lifeguard, and he knows that the end of our time in this pool is the beginning of eternity in another. Imagine the fun! As one old fellow unpretentiously commented to me in the pool this morning, "The water feels good, doesn't it?" □

—Monte Wolverton