

“If you can float...”

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“...lie gently and wide in the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.”

writes Philip Booth, the final lines of “The First Lesson.” The first lesson of what? The first swimming lesson? Or perhaps the first lesson of how to live? If you can trust, you can float. If you can float, you can trust. Trust is the initial task of unfolding, of blossoming as an infant into a child.

Erik Erikson, in his mid-20th century classic essay on “The Eight Stages of Man,” whose title reflected the culture then—or he would surely have referred to it as stages of personhood—suggested that there are cycles that we go through in developing, cycles holding tensions between opposing forces. Each force pulls us in a certain direction, from the inside out and the outside in. Let’s hone in on that first phase: the tension between trust and mistrust.

What allows any of us as a newborn, as a blossoming baby, to trust? We’ve just taken a huge leap of faith—bursting through the cozy comfy substance of the only world that we knew, a warm ocean inside our biological mother. There comes a point when that ocean is too small for us. Unless circumstances of our unborn selves prevent it, we have no choice but to be born. So we wriggle and squirm and make our primal demands, tunneling our way through that birth canal until Ka-boom! Out of that warm bath into the brightest of lights.

After the rude awakening into what we know as life, it’s amazing that we can ever trust. In the words of Mary Oliver, Provincetown poet who may as well be the poet laureate of Unitarian Universalists:

Once every wall was water,
the soft strings filled
with a perfect nourishment,

pumping your body full
of appetite, elaborating
your stubby bones, tucking in,
like stars,

the seeds of restlessness
that made you, finally,
swim toward the world,
kicking and shouting,

However we kick and shout and enter the world as if landing on another planet, when we’re cuddled and fed and nurtured and loved, we learn with our whole beings that this planet that is our world is safe enough to grow in, to explore, to connect with, and more, much more.

If you can float—and we all have in our primordial essence—you can stay the course long enough to burst through that inevitable canal into the light of day.

If you can float, you can trust. If you trust, you can let go of fear. If you can let go of fear, life in its fullest dimensions is possible. While trust v. mistrust is the tension of that first stage of our development as human beings, according to Ericsson (and I return to him repeatedly for wisdom of how we develop and grow), we face again and again circumstances that bring us to crossroads with one path calling us to embrace the unknown and another path calling us to fear the unknown and avoid it however we can.

This is not just theory. For those of you who are children here this morning, remember your first day of kindergarten, or maybe pre-school? Were you excited? Were you terrified? Maybe you were both excited and terrified. Maybe you suddenly had a tummy ache and found all sorts of reasons why you shouldn't let go of the hand of your Mommy or Daddy or other grownup to whom you clung as your bedrock safety. Why let go of a good thing? Why step into a space of other kids—some of them eager and raring to check out the new space, others terrified and in tears? Will you venture into the foggy possibility that you will be safe and loved in this new space? Will you dig your heels in and come up with every way you can imagine NOT to let go, including a rip-roaring tantrum?

Chances are you made it through the door and eventually let go of the familiar hand. Chances are that you remained for that first day of school and the second day and the third. You let go. Perhaps we can say that you learned again how to float. You trusted that what was there would somehow “hold you up.”

I've shared with some of you a promise that I made to myself a long time ago. Actually, it was a promise that I made to myself as a child. As a little girl, I watched and noticed so many grown-ups who seemed not to understand what it meant to be a kid. I guessed they had simply forgotten or maybe for some crazy reason had chosen to forget what it was like. We all have our reasons for remembering and forgetting those seasons of our life that shape us into who we are now. I was lucky. I had a pretty good childhood, with a family who loved me and an extended family of aunts and uncles and cousins who weren't necessarily my relatives. I lived in a neighborhood where I could go outside and play without my parents having to watch me every second—not like my own birth children who were born in New York City, where parents don't just open the door and say, “Go outside and play.” I had playmates all over the neighborhood. And when I was about four years old, my Mom took me to our local swimming pool. Now I'm getting to that promise that I made to myself, so hold on.

Though not an accomplished swimmer herself, my Mother somehow knew that I loved the water. Just as she had done with my older brother, she nurtured my water play. On the steaming afternoons of July and August, we headed to our local pool—actually two pools, but our destination was what I knew as the “baby pool.” There she watched me toddle out to the “deep part,” dunk my head, splash myself and anyone else who would surely think it great fun, and play contentedly the better part of an afternoon. Then summer after summer the lifeguards for the “big pool” taught me to swim. I had no problem dunking my head in the water. Learning to float, or “remembering” how to float, took not much more time. Then it was simply mastering the movements and at long last getting the breathing right so that it felt effortless.

By the time I was 15, I was teaching other children to swim. “Open your eyes,” I would coax them. “Can you imagine walking about out of the pool with your eyes closed?” And I would praise and cheer this first act of faith. Then came the second act of faith—floating—not

on your back, but on your tummy. “Imagine that you’re flying and you can’t fall, because the water holds you up!” And then, “If you can float, you can swim!”

The fun took over the fear. The reality took over the reticence. The faith, now grounded in evidence, consumed the doubt. As I grew in confidence and competence, the rites of summer meant hanging out at the pool with my friends, then lifeguarding and teaching swimming with my friends. I wondered. What was it about some of the grown-ups that allowed them just to sit on the side of the pool, talking and sunbathing and hardly ever taking a plunge? I must have been 12 or 13 when I made that promise to myself that I mentioned earlier: Never would I forget what it felt like to be a kid. Never would I forget what it felt like to feel that freedom that I knew most fully through playing and splashing and swimming in that long ago pool. Thank you, Mom, thank you!

Yet you might be among those who say they’re afraid of the water and that you never learned to swim. Perhaps you’re among those who say they’re afraid of flying, that you must, simply must take a train or ride in a car, or head out on an ocean liner, if you’re to take a long trip. Trust over mistrust, letting go over holding on, step by step discovering that trusting and letting go and taking that leap of faith isn’t necessarily BETTER than otherwise, it’s more fun. It’s exhilarating.

It wasn’t until the age of 20 that I swam in the ocean. As courageous as I thought I was, my first trip to Jones Beach, not far from New York City, humbled me. I had no experience whatsoever riding waves. It took another decade or so before I learned. Hope morphed into practice morphed into timing morphed into exhilaration morphed back into that state with which we all struggle at the outset—trust.

Everyone wonders whether the water will really “hold them up.” Always entranced by the open water, the early 20th century Australian swimming champion Annette Kellerman had her own doubts. It was almost a hundred years ago that she wrote in her book, *How to Swim*:

“I first loved the ocean when I was a child because it made me curious. I wondered whether it really went down and down, if it would hold me up.”

How quickly we forget that we come from water, that we’re mostly water, that our planet is close to three-quarters water, that water on any planet would be a sign of life, that water is life sustaining. We flow from it; it flows through us; we’re alive because of it. So too the expansiveness of the waters call to us when we embark on that ultimate voyage. In her poem, “The Avowal,” Denise Levertov illuminates the setting forth—no vessel needed.

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky ☐
and water bears them, ☐
as hawks rest upon air
☐and air sustains them, ☐
so would I learn to attain ☐
freefall, and float
☐into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace, ☐
knowing no effort earns ☐
that all-surrounding grace.

So may it be and Amen

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