

## Swimming In The Gene Pool

Tonight I swim with the dead. To be more specific, I swim with the memory of my departed relatives. If you don't already know it, you could guess that swimming laps can be very boring. I am not a competitor, but swim twice a week just to keep limber and conditioned. I come to the high school pool with a group of women and enjoy the camaraderie as much as the exercise.

Before starting and between sets of laps I usually visit with the women in the next lanes. We enjoy the occasional joke, bits of news and reminiscing about our friendship which spans three decades. It's usually a happy visit. But tonight all my friends are absent. Where? Special dinner, illness, or community meetings I suppose. I have an entire hour to swim alone. Yet, I opt to swim with my dead relatives-- swimming over a half a mile with the memory of members of my family whom I knew and loved, but now are gone.

I begin a warm up thinking of my first husband. I push off and recall the joy of love at first sight, twenty-eight happy years together, and travels both with and without children. But suddenly, I am shocked once again to remember how he died so suddenly on our couch and shudder at my feeble attempts to bring him back to life. My heart skips a beat and I try to draw in breath, but my chest is tight. My arm strokes speed up as if to flee the emotional pain and my swimming becomes less effective. To regain my technique, I stop to stretch my legs and shoulders and imagine how much he would be interested in the condition of the world today.

Again I push off from the edge and think about my parents. Relaxed, I glide to the far edge

and make a perfect flip turn. As I break the water's surface I remember how my father also died suddenly when I was 19. He was a hard-working, good, very private man who worked for the UPS back in the days when they delivered furniture and appliances. My brother was only six years old at the time. I think about John growing up without a father and of the kind of father he is now. I switch to a different swim stroke as I think of my mother whose influence is seen in my everyday life including my stubbornness in these very work-outs. I rejoice that I was able to spend the last 18 months of her life with her. When I find it difficult to get up off the couch and go to the pool at night, I do it because of her. She always taught me that if something is difficult you don't give up, but dig in --or in this case, kick-- harder.

I stop to adjusted my goggles and push off thinking of my grand mothers and their life struggles. One was an immigrant from Slovenia and the other was an American Indian born on a reservation. My life has been a breeze compared to theirs. They are my heroes and am glad that women have it so much better today. I push off from the wall extra hard and swim two vigorous laps for each of them.

Lap after lap of free-style I call to mind the two dozen or so aunts, uncles and cousins whom I knew and dearly loved. I remember summer re-unions on grandmother's porch, picking hazelnuts, contests of spitting watermelon seeds in the yard, driving trips to my aunt's beach house and sleepovers with cousins giggling all night and playing all day under the watchful eyes and ears of the adults. To a person my aunts and uncle were generous and loving.

I swim for Dorothy who, as a WAVE during WWII, deciphered messages sent from the war zone. Ironically at the end of her life at 91, she spoke only gibberish. It warms me see in my mind her affable face with sparkling eyes and deep dimples.

I swim a vigorous lap for uncle Charlie who served as a foot soldier in WWII. He died this last December at age 89. As I struggle to keep up my pace, I think of how he never let being shot in the back in Luxembourg in 1943 and consequently becoming a paraplegic to stand in the way of his being either active or happy. He worked through his therapy and went on to a new life in a wheelchair. It was mostly his example that encouraged me to become a physical therapist. I stretch way out with my arms and pull hard in his honor.

I switch to the back stroke and stifle a laugh-- because you can't laugh and swim at the same time-- thinking of my uncle Vic. He'd been a famous band leader in the 1930s and later a political figure in Washington state. He once ran for mayor of Seattle dressed as a guru with a goat in tow. He sported a pencil thin mustache and always had a cigar. He was a jokester and would say "kiddo" to me a lot. I loved him and still love the smell of a cigar because of him.

As I roll into breast stroke and take a breath, the glittering play of lights on pool's surface reminds me my cousin Shirley's hair--as fine and gold as spun sunshine. I visualize her in her quiet yard wearing a hula skirt. She was always sweet, but died way too young. I see my cousin Sparkie, as bright as his name, just 38 when he died. I think of Ronnie, a cute red-headed, freckled second cousin who died of a brain tumor when he was only 10.

I stop at the edge of the pool and take a sip of water from my bottle. I remember having drinks and partying with my cousin Don when we were both in the military. I recall how dashing he looked in his Marine uniform when he proudly showed me his ship.

I check my pace against the clock on the wall and swim a lap for my cousin Alice who died suddenly on the eve of her first visit to visit me in Alaska. I kick harder ridding myself of the anger at such critical bad timing. I resolve to plan to see my remaining family as soon and often

as possible. As I return for yet another lap I remember my cousin Mary Louise with whom I shared a bedroom, clothes and secrets one summer. For a while she was closer to me than my sister; but she has been gone many years now.

As I swim a lap for each one, I reflect on how their lives have affected my own in some positive way. I pray for their souls and for their remaining family. As I finish my half-mile and pick up the kick board for a cool-down I think about those family members whom I met only once or not at all. Particularly I think about my father's sister Vina and her husband Kay who, because they were so much older, served as his surrogate parents when needed. I think of their son, my cousin, Harold who was thirty years my senior. Having grown up with my father, he knew him better than I ever did; yet I never knew Harold except through his many letters. Ah!-- the wonderful history contained in the letters. I vow to write a card or letter to my one remaining aunt soon.

I realize that although they are long gone, they are all are part of my history and therefore should never be forgotten by me. I finish my workout and gather my water bottle and deck shoes and head toward the stairs at the edge of the pool and get out. Tears mix with pool water and fall from my goggles. I feel physically and emotionally exercised to the fullest. The next time my friends don't arrive to swim I will spend my work-out time with the memories of the many neighbors, friends and former co-workers who have died. There are so many that I cannot swim that much on one occasion. But, as long as I am able there will always be another visit to the pool.