Opinion
Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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It’s high noon in August, and the surface of the pale blue water of our neighborhood pool is about to be broken. A long line of adults stands by the railing. Some thank the waiting life guards. “I need this so much,” an elderly man tells them. “This hour of water walking helps me stay sane the rest of the day.”

The Furman Family Aquatic Center is now open for the sacrament of water walking. A few eager souls run down the ramp, their feet hopping on the hot concrete before they jump into the cold water, squealing like children. “It’s not that bad!” they shout to the rest of us as they laugh with chattering teeth.

Some folks who use braces leave them at the pool’s edge. They count on help from a friend, spouse or case worker to maneuver into the shallow water. Soon, with increasing confidence, they conquer the churning waves.

Only once a day does the pool provide a sanctuary where limbs, spirits and souls can walk off worry and pain. This precious commodity of community water has been set aside just for this purpose — for healing and rejuvenation, to be shared by everyone in this brief time in space. Every person here has a good reason — to soak up sun, prevent bone loss, heal from surgery, meet friends, have alone time. The brochure calls it “water walking,” but I call it a place of holy communion.

There is a reason why we humans are intuitively drawn to water: pools, creeks, rivers, lakes and oceans are some of the places we gather to heal ourselves. A friend confirmed this to me as we water walked one morning. “It is the only time of the day when I don’t have pain,” she said. “I wish I could live in this pool.”

Periods of silence are necessary when you water walk. It is easy to listen in on conversations this way. There are the expected political rants with the friend agreeing. One conversation centered on a mother explaining how happy she was that her son had finally accepted Jesus as his personal savior. And then there was a group of primary school teachers who could do nothing else but talk about the wonderful kids they have in class this year.

I want to hear the rest but must concentrate on not losing my footing and going under the water, which would mean certain disaster for my fancy Kentucky Derby hat. Once you commit to this wet world, there is no other choice but to keep moving forward with the current.

Almost everyone can be classified as one or the other kind of water walker — a smiler as they walk or a grimacer who endures. They also break down by gender. Women like to travel in groups, laughing and chatting along the way. Men tend to walk with their wives, but they soon find themselves ditched when she has spotted a friend. So many wind up walking alone, on the opposite side of the pool, braving it all the way.

Sometimes people walk with the current and sometimes they walk against it. Life is too hard as it is, I'm learning, to spend one's time in the lovely water and beautiful sun, moving against a current you can't control. Yet many of us do, with determination on our faces.

I once read a book called *Your Inner Fish*, which traces the 3.5-billion-year journey of the human body out of the water, evolving into a higher creature. I wonder what kind of fish I used to be and what kind of being we are all becoming.

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Jesus taught that water changes people. It is the basic element of life we must have to survive this world. If bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ, is it possible that all of us water walking are pilgrims on a journey of communion as well? Our sacred bodies, blessed, broken and shared by Christ are here to present hands for assistance and words of encouragement for others in this wet and wild liminal space. Each of us goes away having experienced communion in some strange, powerful, full-bodied and concrete way. We return to the water again and again hoping to receive but accepting as well the challenge it presents. It is a powerful moment of hope and trust in a gift that runs soul deep.

One last group entering the pool is from a facility for people with mental disabilities. The group slowly moves alongside their caregivers in single file like a strand of white pearls clinging to the edge of the pool. Some are frightened as they first feel the current; others begin to complain about how cold the water is against their bodies. It occurs to me that everyone here is the same — we are one body of broken humanity brought to the water struggling, gasping for breath, sinking at times, whining and complaining, yet open to receiving the joy that life's swirling cold water presents us.

We are immersed in holy communion.

A bold, red-haired young man splits away from the group and plunges headlong into the water. He leaps up in front of my face shouting, “I’m a shark!”

“I hope you’re a nice shark,” I stammer, but he doesn’t hear me. Filled with the joy and spirit of our communion, he isn’t going to walk in the water like the rest of us.

He has evolved. He is going to run.

[Sue Stanton is a journalist and author of *Great Women of Faith: Inspiration for Action*. She writes from Ames, Iowa. All of the Soul Seeing columns can be read at NCRonline.org/blogs/soul-seeing.]

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