

LEARNING TO SWIM

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From the sidelines, I watch as my son Joseph makes his way through the pool, his legs joined together and pumping the water first from the bend in his waist, then from his knees to his ankles. The dolphin kick was never one I mastered, and I marvel that at age four, he can coordinate holding on to the kickboard with straight arms while performing that awkward kick. He forces his body through the water with tireless energy. Sometimes he creates a great splash like he is fighting against the water, refusing to let it slow him down.

I want to urge him to take his time, to enjoy the water washing over him, soothing his body. He wouldn't hear me anyway. The acoustics reduce my voice to muffled white noise. The large goggles disorient him, slightly—dulling his other senses.

Despite the fact that they are twins, when it is Anthony's turn, their approaches stand in stark contrast. Anthony takes long, deliberate overhead strokes. Sometimes I lean forward in my seat and strain to see if the instructor isn't guiding his arms, they rise that high out of the water. Slowly he makes his way as if he has all the time in the world. His pace suffers at the expense of his graceful form. He will do it right. His lesson is work and he is focused; serious, even. I applaud his determination, but I want him to know he needn't be perfect to enjoy his swim. I smile when he rolls onto his back and floats without apprehension, letting the water cradle him.

I clap for them both, relieved that the tears that marred the first few weeks of lessons are behind us. When today's lesson is over, they beg to stay. They put on neon orange water wings

so they can frolic with the reckless abandon only two four-year-olds can. I wonder if there is such a thing for us parents. Is there something we can wear to protect us from harm and worry? Short of never reading a newspaper again, I come up empty-handed. Is there something that would ever let me dare to be a little reckless?

My girlfriend had a minor health scare, and finally she dismissed her worry as being neurotic. Embarrassed by her own concern, she justified her behavior saying, “You know when it was just me in the world, I couldn’t care less. But I have a child who needs me now.”

Indeed, I know what she means. I have never been to the doctor as frequently as since I had my boys. It’s not that I’ve been sick more often, it’s just that I can’t afford to get them sick, or to be out of commission. They need me too much. Sometimes that tugging feels like they are tearing bits of my flesh off the bone. The incessant requests, needs, bruises, tears. Yet, with that burden comes the undeniable magical power I possess to make things right in the world, for the time being, anyway.

In the water, they are particularly giddy. They race. They jump. They flail about. They do not need me to be on top of them. I am merely a bystander overseeing the splashing. Someday they will understand that my role is limited. They possess all the power they need to forge their paths, as only they know how.

I wonder if Joseph will plow through his obstacles using his sheer force and belief that he cannot be stopped. Will Anthony methodically chart his course and stick with it, not allowing himself to be distracted? I like to think of them making their way alongside one another. Parallel lines that don’t need to intersect, but that are close by.

I wonder how I will do watching them from the sidelines.