

VOICES

Drowning at Midlife? Start Swimming

By Judi Ketteler

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A funny thing came out of my mouth at the doctor's office a few months ago. I was there to learn what was causing the unbearable pain in my left calf when I ran. When the doctor diagnosed posterior tibial tendinitis and prescribed frequent icing, physical therapy and no running for a few months, I said, "I think I'm going to try swimming."

"Great idea," she said.

It *was* a great idea. I just wasn't sure where it came from. I didn't know anything about swimming, other than how to not drown by moving my limbs in a way that roughly mimicked what real swimmers did. But as soon as I said it, it felt obvious. And I knew, in that place in your soul where you *know* things, that I was going to become a swimmer at the age of 43 — and perhaps even become pretty decent at it, despite never having swum more than a lap or two in my life.

I knew this because I had just read "Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife" by the NPR reporter Barbara Bradley Hagerty. She writes about midlife as a gold mine of opportunity and possibility. I had accidentally stumbled upon her book, bleary-eyed and depressed after reading an Oprah piece about how so many Generation X women like myself were having midlife crises. I ticked all the boxes: stymied career, overburdened marriage, caregiving sandwich.

My 9-year-old son had just been given a diagnosis of A.D.H.D. My father-in-law was dying. I was constantly worried my 82-year-old mother was going to fall. And the bills and kids' homework assignments, not to mention the deadlines for my own work projects, were on a rinse-repeat cycle. But the nonconformist in me decided that if every other fortysomething woman was having

a crisis, I was going to consciously decide *not* to have one.

True, running was my No. 1 form of stress relief and the main thing keeping me sane. But as Ms. Hagerty told me when I called her up to talk about my plan, “Midlife is the perfect time to try something new because you’ve lived enough years to know yourself. You have a good sense of who you are, and when you approach something new, you can pivot on your skills and passions.” I would find salvation in the pool.

I texted the YMCA instructor who taught my 7-old-year daughter to swim last summer. “Can you give me a lesson and teach me how to breathe?” I asked.

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She agreed, and we met at the Y pool early on a Saturday morning. She showed me how to breathe every third stroke, which meant alternating breathing on either side. “Lots of people struggle to do this and only want to breathe to one side,” she explained. Here, I saw the benefit of being a beginner: I had no bad habits or muscle memory leading me astray. Tell me to breathe every third stroke? No problem.

Next, she showed me how to bend my elbow as I reached for the next stroke, as if I was dragging my hand up the side of my torso. I had pictured my arms as windmills, gracefully circling around, but she said that was less efficient, and bad for my shoulders. “Got it,” I said, practicing the drill she gave me.

In 30 minutes and for \$20, I learned enough to get started. I hit the pool twice that week, swimming about 30 laps each time. I enjoyed it, but the goggles I had borrowed from the Y were terrible, my suit from the past summer was stretched out and dragged in the water, and the chlorine was wreaking havoc on my hair color. I decided to invest in a decent suit, a good pair of goggles, and a swimming cap. When I tried on the ensemble at home, my daughter told me, “Mom, you look like an Olympic person!” I wasn’t there yet but I was committed and set a goal: swimming a mile, 66 lengths of the Y’s pool, without stopping.

Ms. Hagerty researched what drives the pursuit of sport in middle age and was struck by what Catharine Utzschneider, a trainer who works with middle-aged athletes who want to compete at an elite level, told her: “She talks about how when you’re young, there are a lot of milestones. But midlife can seem to go on and on, like a sentence with no punctuation. Having goals can break up the monotony of your responsible days and give you little victories.” Cycling did that for her, Ms. Hagerty told me, a journey that led her to compete in the National Senior Games.

The next Tuesday, I headed to the Y, put on my swimming gear and started my laps. I swallowed water a handful of times — I was still getting the knack of breathing, went crooked in my lane, and knew that my flutter kicking was uneven and lackluster, but I didn’t stop. Forty three exhausting minutes later I had completed 33 laps of the pool. I’ve never been so happy to stink like chlorine the rest of the day.

I’ve continued my pool workouts three times a week, working on my technique, with a new goal to swim a mile in under 40 minutes. I plan to get back to running in a few months but will blend it with swimming. Maybe I’ll take a lesson in good cycling technique and even do a triathlon. Maybe I’ll try something else altogether.

But this I know: I’m not going to have a midlife crisis.