

A Feel for the Water

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There was a story about the quantum theorist Werner Heisenberg, on his deathbed, declaring that he will have two questions for God: why relativity, and why turbulence. Heisenberg says, "I really think He may have an answer to the first question."

—James Gleick, in *Chaos: Making a New Science*¹

If I could choose another subject to take in school it would be swimming. Why? Just put it this way: I LOVE swimming! To me, it's the best thing in the world.

—Carly Hensel, in a second-grade essay

Midlife is upon me with a vengeance. My son has turned thirteen-with-an-attitude, and my familiar ways of parenting seem to do nothing but make me want to yell at him. After years of loneliness, my father found love and a reason to live—then died. Just 4 months after her husband died of lung cancer, my sister-in-law was diagnosed with breast cancer. My wife's parents, who live in another city, are struggling with disabilities that threaten to take away their independence, and I wonder what my wife and I will do if their house of cards comes tumbling down. In the midst of such turbulence, I, too, would like to ask God, "Why?"

Once a manageable chaos, work adds to the tumult of my life. After spending years on the quiet periphery of academia, the community hospital family practice residency program where I teach has suddenly become popular. Now my affiliate medical school looks in my direction to provide more generalist experiences for their medical students. Although it has plenty of students to send, no money is proffered to help carry the teaching burden they add to our faculty's already weighty load.

Even the simple act of renewing my driver's license turned into a stinging reminder of my age when the bureaucrat pronounced my hair color to be gray instead of the familiar brown. I am caught in the vortex of midlife,

and it would be easy for me to complain that I am drowning.

But I am a swimmer. I joined a swim team at age 6. By the time I had reached adolescence, swimming was my sport, giving me the positive identity I needed to cope with another difficult stage of life. At 14, I was tall and gangly, awkward to the excruciating degree that can only befall a teenaged boy. But in the water I was graceful, and my fragile confidence grew, as did my love of the water.

For those who have never enjoyed competitive swimming, it is difficult to convey the importance of having a "feel for the water." A swimmer should be able to grasp the water with the palm of his hand and keep it from slipping through his fingers. With this grip, a swimmer can use all his strength to push and pull his way through the water. In college, I grew to love what I considered to be the ultimate test of strength and feel, the 50-yard freestyle. The controlled rage of this, the shortest sprint event, allowed no margin for error and seemed far more exacting than the longer tests of endurance. In my own way, I learned more about fluid dynamics than most physicists.

Then I entered medicine and quit swimming—or so I thought. I chose family medicine and teaching because it "felt right." At the time, I probably would have explained my choice by saying I liked the way family doctors approached their patients. For me, patients were not puzzles to be solved or broken machines to be taken apart and fixed. Instead, each patient was a unique life into which I had the privilege of diving. Now I look back and believe that I chose this field because it gave me the chance to leave the solid ground of analytic/deductive/reductionistic thinking that provides the intellectual foundation for much of medicine and enter the fluid medium of generalist medicine with its inductive/holistic/experiential reasoning.² It was swimming all over again.

For it is the "feel" of generalist patient care that is most important. Mr Jones has abdominal pain and I need to decide how to dive in. Do I focus on his job, his alcohol consumption, his diet, or his relationship with his wife or children? Do I offer him an H₂ blocker, reassurance, further testing, or counseling? Ms Smith is depressed and has

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pelvic pain. Do I tell her about neurotransmitters, or do I bring up the possibility of previous sexual abuse? Six of the patients that I see today will be smokers and there is a good chance that at least one of them may be near quitting. Will I be able to say something that will grab hold of these lives and push them in a positive direction? Or will I let this opportunity slip through my fingers? Swimming, always swimming.

I guess it comes as no surprise that I decided to return to competitive swimming as a way of coping with my midlife crisis. I had been out of the water for 19 years, and although my strength and endurance were gone, I still had the feel. Now, slowly, through training, I am getting in better condition. Practice has always been the key to enjoying a fluid environment. I practice swimming and I practice medicine. The two seem strangely similar.

The water does not suffer from my imperfect performance, but my patients do. To my amazement, though, most of them dwell on my successes and tolerate my failures with grace. For this I am thankful, and for the privilege of practicing in their lives. For it is the practice that teaches me not only how to be a better doctor but also how to rise above the turbulence: to remember that my unpredictably ill-tempered teenaged son is a normal,

wonderful person, that my father's death was more of a blessing than a curse, and that life's challenges are endless.

Thus, through my patients, I have come to realize that the ability to sprint is not nearly as important as the ability to endure. Admittedly, I am still distressed at times by the turmoil of midlife, but I am neither overwhelmed nor pessimistic. At work, at home, and at play, I am in the fluid medium that I love. With the insight that is unique to childhood, my daughter, Carly, showed that she understands water better than Heisenberg. We should not waste our time asking God, "Why turbulence?" We should just enjoy our chance to swim.

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References

1. Gleick J. Chaos: making a new science. New York: Penquin Books, 1987.
2. Pruessner HT, Hensel WA, Rasco TL. The scientific basis of generalist medicine. *Acad Med* 1992; 67(4):232-5.