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Breaststroke, Backstroke, Place and Finish

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I swam in a public, concrete pool when I was in high school. After high school, I swam in rivers and streams and avoided public pools, because I didn't like the strong chlorine, but mainly because I was usually near rivers and streams and not near concrete pools.

I didn't swim during the last dozen years because I wasn't near swimmable water.

We moved to central Oregon, and I discovered the local swim and fitness center, which is close and on the way to other, necessary places. I tried the indoor pool and decided if I bought goggles and ear plugs, the chlorine wouldn't bother me. I bought a card for unlimited swimming for three months.

I hadn't forgotten how to swim, but it did take me a few times in the pool before I coordinated legs, arms, and breathing into reasonably smooth motion through the water. I swam almost every day, and I improved my form and increased the distance I swam.

Saturday morning, I walked into the swim and fitness center. People grouped around the counter. I reached forward and showed my pass to the woman behind the counter. We thanked each other, and I walked into the locker room, changed, showered, fastened my locker key to my swimming suit, and walked out of the locker room to the first pool. Lane dividers had been stretched the length of the pool, and two lanes had no swimmers.

I descended the ladder into the end lane and swam down and back twice, concentrating on smoothing out my swimming and on changing from crawl to side stroke to back stroke and variations of

all of them. When I swam toward the end of my second time back the length of the pool, a lifeguard crouched on the concrete just above the water, waiting for my attention. She said, "This lane is just a starter lane, where people dive in. You shouldn't keep swimming in this lane."

"Okay." I submerged, swam under the lane divider, surfaced, and swam down the second lane. What she had said seemed peculiar, since all around the pool, "NO DIVING" had been painted on the concrete. According to the way of doing things described by the signs, the only approved diving was from the diving boards, and the boards weren't used when the lane dividers were in place. However, whatever the people who worked at the place wanted to do was all right with me. They made the rules, and if they wanted to vary them from time to time, it didn't cost me anything.

I kept swimming. More swimmers used the lane I had entered. They seemed very serious and in a hurry. Two people swam down the lane and back, almost matched, stroke for stroke, and the next time I looked, they were gone, and the lane was empty, except for me. I kept swimming, and two more people passed me. I didn't know where they came from, but I gave them room, and I kept swimming. Maybe they found my slower presence a distraction, and the next lane over was clear, so they switched to that lane, still very serious, but changing from a crawl to a backstroke.

At the shallow end of the pool, I rested for a few minutes. There seemed to be much more contact between the people than I'd seen at any other time, and I liked that. Usually, most of the people using the pool seemed reserved. They would give a nod as they passed, but they kept a private space around them.

These people got in and out of the pool and walked along the concrete engaged in happy chatter, calling each other by name,

talking about last time they had seen each other, or introducing themselves and their friends. I thought about joining in, but most of the conversation seemed to be about number of laps swum, lap time, and overall time. I didn't have any statistics to throw into the conversation yet, so I swam toward the other end, fairly pleased with my form, and found the lifeguard crouched on the concrete just above the water, waiting for me again. I held onto the end of the pool and looked up at her.

She asked me, "Are you here for the meet?"

"What meet?"

"The swim meet. Both pools are closed to open swimming, because there's a swim meet going on."

"Oh. No, I'm not. I didn't know that. Is it all right if I swim back down so I can get out at the ladder?"

"Sure. The hot tub is open, and they'll finish with this pool at one o'clock."

I swam the length of the pool, climbed the ladder, and sat in the hot tub. I could have seen my experience as an opportunity for embarrassment, but I decided not to. I didn't know, and nobody told me about the meet.

When I left the swim center, I saw what had happened. A sign saying the pools were closed for a meet and the posted schedule wasn't valid sat on the counter, but when I came in, people clustered around the counter and blocked my view of the sign.

I walked out into the sunshine. What a beautiful day. I had swum enough to satisfy me, and, with only nine or ten practices after twelve years of no swimming at all, I had placed in a swim meet. I had placed, I'm sure, at the very bottom, but placed nonetheless. I fished my car keys out of my pocket and began to prepare for the next adventure of the day.