

I Find Grace in the Middle of a Mountain Lake

That's me in the photograph, sixteen years old, in my swimming suit, standing in snow beside Scott Lake, high in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. Snowballs, stopped in the air all these years by the camera's shutter, fly toward me.

I dodged snowballs my siblings threw at me by running into the lake. The water was much warmer than I expected, late spring, when only snow shaded by north slope and dense stands of evergreens survived warm sunshine.

I should have stopped to think, but warm water and sunshine overpowered any cautionary thoughts I might have had. Snowballs splashed around me, and I swam toward where my older brother, Gerrit, and his friend, Dave, paddled a slow and clumsy log raft, about the center of the lake, not far away.

Only weeks before, I had eventually convinced my physical education teacher that I couldn't float. I followed his instructions carefully and, time after time, sank to the bottom of the swimming pool. He was wrong. Some people don't float. They are built compactly, densely, and they sink unless they keep themselves on the surface by some effort, and I was one of those people.

But I didn't think of that. Sun shone on the warm water. The day was pleasant. I was young and strong, and I would swim to the raft. I swam out of snowball range. I swam. I swam some more. I shifted to a side stroke. I swam on my back. I returned to a crawl, and I realized the raft was much farther from shore than I had at first thought. I tired. I swam.

I didn't seem to be getting any closer to the raft. I looked back to the shore. It was a long way. I'd been foolish to start, to get so far from shore while still so far from the raft. I needed to rest, and there was no way I could stop swimming, because I would sink.

I was too young to die, especially as a result of a stupid decision, but it seemed there was no other way to go but to sink. I've heard your whole life flashes before you when you are close to death, but it didn't happen to me, just a strong sense of regret that I had been so foolish, that I had lived such a short time, and I gave up and prepared to sink. I let my feet start down toward the bottom, out of my sight because of slightly muddy water, and my feet stopped short on the muddy bottom.

I stood shoulder deep in the center of the lake and laughed and breathed deeply in warm air in sunshine. Probably, I thought, the water in the lake was so warm because it was so shallow and could warm rapidly in sunshine. I laughed again. I had had no idea the lake was so shallow.

Life seemed sweet in warm sunshine, in warm water. Soft mud of the bottom felt good to my feet. Ha. Ha ha ha. I had songs to sing yet, dances to dance, stories to tell. I might live many years yet.

I started walking slowly toward the raft through shoulder deep, warm water, high on the mountain. I didn't think I'd tell anyone why I laughed in the middle of Scott Lake. It could be a secret between me and Scott Lake why life, already sweet and full of sunshine on a warm mountain day, seemed even sweeter to me, even more precious and full of sunshine, with many adventures ahead of me.