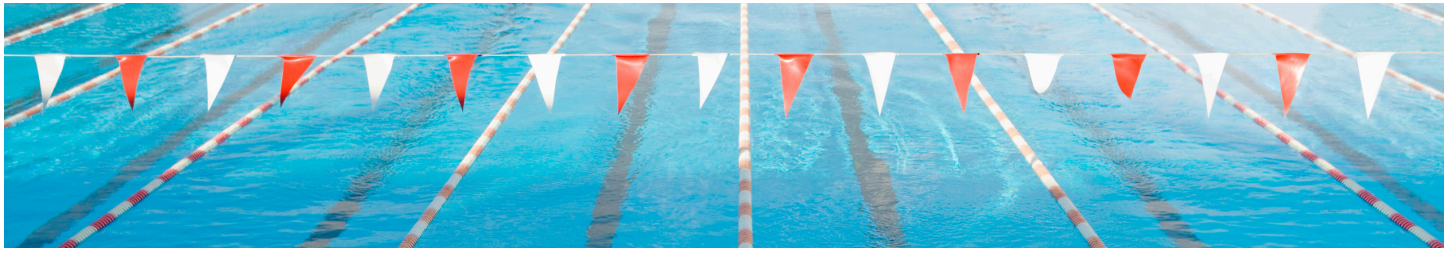




The Long-Distance Swimmer



She is a long-distance swimmer.

She remembers the day when she was about four years old, her mother teaching her to float on her back in the tannin-stained, broad river. Her mother called out with childlike excitement on that baking hot summer day: “You are swimming, you are swimming!”

Her mother thought the beach “was divine.” Many dry summer days were spent with her and her sister skylarking in the Indian Ocean. They would dive for shells, do “bommies” off the jetty, and dare each other to swim out “deep.”

Those were days of pure joy and bliss. Hours and hours lost to flowing, spontaneous play. She and her sister were immersed in a world of imagined sea creatures, swimming super-fast to evade them. They pushed their physical limits—holding their breath underwater until they could no longer delay the gasp. She laughed at her sister’s silly antics. They would find treasures like sea-smoothed glass and poke their index fingers into sea anemones, holding them there while the anemones closed and sucked on their fingertips.

When she started primary school, another kind of swimming entered her life. Every summer, she and her classmates were subjected to the Education Department’s Swimming Program. Her class would march in single file from the classroom to the school swimming pool, located behind the footy oval. Swimming lessons were a different kind of swimming altogether.

At first, it was easy to please her swimming teacher. Immersing her head underwater: *I can do that!* Kicking with a kickboard: *easy peasy!* Frog kick: *simple!*

But as the seasons of swimming lessons ticked over, something shifted. She was singled out as having “natural ability in the water.”

Adults called it a “gift.” They watered the gift to grow something in her that at first felt foreign and strange. Lap by lap, time interval by time interval, drill by drill, timed effort by timed effort, they chiseled away at the raw gift to shape it into something of their own. What emerged was the long-distance swimmer.

The long-distance swimmer within her frog-marched her out of bed at 4:30 a.m. for training. That swimmer switched on a laser beam of focus—stroke rate, kick beat, breathing pattern—excluding fatigue and pain. The long-distance swimmer within gained energy from fear: fear of not being the best, fear of not being exceptional, fear of being a “nobody,” of being invisible.

She wouldn't say her parents were “mean” or punished her harshly. In fact, many would say she had a privileged life and wanted for nothing during her formative years. Yes, she wanted for nothing in many ways. But an ache yawned throughout those years—an ache attached to longing. The longing for her mother's soothing gaze. For her father's protective embrace. Both were always already preoccupied with their own aspirations.

From the periphery of their lives, she keenly observed that striving for excellence was the passport to significance and worth.

She is now a grown woman. Every year, she enters open-water, ultra-endurance swimming events. Friends, acquaintances, and colleagues believe she excels at everything she turns her hand to. Her life seems “perfect.”

But behind the veil of who she appears to be, the yawning ache remains—a constant shadow cast by the external identity she has crafted and continues to refine. The achievements, though many, feel as solid as vapor. The long-distance swimmer within her continues to metaphorically grind up and down the pool, across all domains of her life.

It is that yawning ache—the problem with no name and no apparent justification—that prompts her to see a therapist.

It's a funny thing: almost every time she waits to be greeted by her therapist, she feels uneasy and self-conscious, convinced she'll have nothing to say. That she has no real reason for being there. That therapy is for people with “real problems,” not people like her. “Seriously,” she thinks, “what am I doing here?”

Sometimes she even considers cancelling the session, thinking it will be a waste of time and money. Yet here she is again, sitting on the long lounge opposite her therapist. And again, she is surprised at how, during the session, the therapist tugs gently at a little thread of something—something perceived but unspoken. Then, a whole spool of previously hidden thread unfurls. It is unsettling, exciting, and sometimes shame-inducing or embarrassing—all at once.

Her therapist has this quirky pattern: when the thread is being pulled, they ask how she is feeling—emotionally and physically. These questions are like punctuation marks. Commas in the unspooling process. Little pauses to create space. To observe. To cast an inward gaze over her feelings and bodily sensations as the thread is tugged.

She didn't like it at first. Her gaze would roam over her body in search of feelings, only to meet... nothing, really. Silence. As if her body guarded secrets. “Shhhhhh...” something faint

and ephemeral, like a ghost, would whisper. “Don’t expose echoes of emotion,” it cautioned. “Don’t reveal signatures in the body,” it warned.

The long-distance swimmer knows to keep the focus on pushing through. On being comfortable with discomfort. There is reassurance in that. As long as she can sit in discomfort, she won’t evaporate into a desolate existence.

“No pain, no gain.”

And what is the gain?

Everything.

Being the best of the best.

Being worthy.

Having value.

Deserving of love—if only for a moment.

Keeping the gnarling wolf of mediocrity, of invisibility, at bay.

The long-distance swimmer can’t afford such “intrusions” into consciousness as “How are you feeling?” or “What’s going on in your body?” These considerations disturb her laser focus—her comfort with discomfort.

She knows, from training, that the quietest whisper of sadness, vulnerability, aloneness—or even a tinge of tightness, heaviness, emptiness—can be dangerous. If allowed in, these feelings might stealthily steal her capacity to endure. And that theft would bankrupt her. Without it, she can no longer trade in the currency of worth. She would vanish. Become invisible. A kind of hungry ghost.

“How are you feeling?”

“What can you sense in your body?”

...Nothing.

She feels painfully self-conscious for having nothing to say. She feels like a therapy fraud. It’s awkward. The long-distance swimmer is not willing to be distracted. Thankfully, her therapist can perceive this—and gently tugs at the thread that *is* the long-distance swimmer. Not to unravel her (she is far too tenacious for that), but to draw her into the therapy room. To be seen. To be understood.

The therapist even speaks *directly* to the long-distance swimmer inside her.

Upon reflection, she realizes that meeting the long-distance swimmer within—and truly getting to know her—was when therapy *really* began. Over time, she began to feel love, appreciation, and gratitude for the long-distance swimmer.

She learned that, deep down, the swimmer wasn’t chasing medals. She was swimming to protect a fragile, vulnerable part of her psyche—hidden deep within. The swimmer believed that if she could endure enough, perform enough, push enough, then maybe—just maybe—that hidden part would be embraced as precious.

The irony is, the long-distance swimmer is driven by fear of invisibility and hope of being treasured. Yet, the more she grinds up and down the pool, the more the tender part slips away—unnoticed.

The more the long-distance swimmer sits comfortably with discomfort the more the fragile, vulnerable little part of her goes hungry. With each lap churned out the vulnerable part of her slips further into the realm of a hungry ghost. The ghost of her little self who squealed and skylarked with her sister in the river water. Her little self who got lost when stepping over the threshold into swimming lessons, big kid stuff and then adult business. The hungry ghost of her little self is starving to be tenderly embraced as something treasured and precious just for who she is.

She is learning in therapy that the long-distance swimmer means well. She is striving for a sense of being valued and of having worth. But, the long-distance swimmer's efforts and hard, hard work, are misplaced. The medals she swims for are fool's gold. She is being duped in believing that training will keep invisibility at bay and that her worth will be won. For as long as she continues to strive in this way her attention is deflected from where the genuine need is. The genuine need is to nourish the part of her that starves to be treasured for no other reason than that she is here, walking the earth and is part of humanity.

