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The cover image is sunset in Seoul along the Cheonggyecheon stream. Image by Stefan K on Unsplash.

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FEATURE

OPEN WATER

By Aizita Magaña

I woke up on the day of my swim full of apprehension. In the spirit of facing a long-held fear of drowning, I had agreed to an open-water swim in the east side of the San Francisco Bay. The bay—really a group of connected bays—is filled by water that flows from the Sacramento River from near Mount Shasta and the San Joaquin River three hundred miles away in the Sierra Nevada; these waters eventually merge with the mouth of

the Pacific Ocean at the span of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Several times prior to this, I had swum a short distance in the bay from the shore in Point Richmond at a place called Keller Cove not too far from where our swim would commence that day. Located north of Berkeley, Point Richmond, once the home to Rosie the Riveter and other war-time



A view of San Francisco from the bay from the water with just us and the seals. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.

manufacturing, is now the location of a Chevron oil refinery. A dear friend from college, Jonathan Mayer, who swims often in Keller Cove and has taught swimming for many years, accompanied me on those swims. Although he has my complete confidence, every time I've entered the open water I've done so filled with some degree of fear. That being said, each time I've exited, I've felt exhilarated and maybe even a few millimeters further from my fear of swimming (and drowning) in open water. This is why I've returned for more.

Jonathan assures me that the swim today will be fun and an extraordinary experience. The plan is to board a boat (a small yacht), sail for an hour or so and dive into the middle of the bay. A group of about 12 swimmers will attempt anywhere from 1 to 11 miles and the free yacht ride will make a supervised open-water swim like this one, Jonathan says, a "rare opportunity." We will swim in two small groups or pods, he tells me, which is safer and, for me, is consoling news. Jonathan emails me that his swim goal will be eight miles and I write him back saying mine is to get in.

It has been said that swimming is the only sport in which the coach yells at you for breathing too often and where you aren't able to breathe at some parts of its practice. At what point you breathe while you swim, by what technique (and there are many), and just how much is still up for debate among coaches and swimmers alike. What is agreed upon is that if you want to swim confidently and comfortably, let alone competitively, you need to find a breathing pattern and method that is at least correct for you. I took lessons to learn how to swim and specifically swim freestyle, at the late age of 40-something. For me this meant I could swim to the other side of the pool without anxiously gasping for air. Learning to swim wasn't only a matter of getting fit; I had to learn to coordinate my movements without panicking. Almost twenty years after a near-drowning experience where I got caught in a riptide, I considered the aquatic journey of adult

swimming lessons, and its destination, finding my breath.

I learned to simultaneously keep my legs kicking, rotate my body, and take a breath. I gently turn my head toward the right and slightly upward so that my face leaves the water only long enough to quickly inhale. As I extend my arm in front of me and over my head, it creates a little arch where I catch a breath. Performed on dry land it might look like a person is smelling their armpit, but doing freestyle in the water, I feel like I'm flying. This took years of practice, and I am surprised every time I swim that I actually can. Beyond my regular swims, for several days before leaving for the Bay Area, I rehearsed the open-water swim in my mind and read online about breathing techniques. A rhythmic and balanced breath I know will be critical to how well I swim and also to staying calm.

There are many tenets of correct breathing while you swim and one is to breathe on alternate sides. Called bilateral breathing, you inhale and exhale in turn which doesn't necessarily mean switching sides every time you breathe. For example, you can swim one lap breathing on your right side and the next lap, breathing your left. The most common way is to breathe is every three strokes, or five or seven, swapping sides each time you breathe. Bilateral breathing is said to be more efficient because it contributes symmetry or balance to your stroke. The experts say breathing on only one side can make your stroke lopsided and keep you from swimming in a straight line. This is important especially in open water. It's also assumed that the repetitiveness of one-sided swimming will cause shoulder pain. Both of these things I have experienced, and though I've tried many times, I've never been able to breathe bilaterally. Not skilled at rotating my body enough to the left, it's then too far for my head to turn, so I stick to solely breathing on my right. Almost 10 years since my first lesson, I consider myself to be a barely competent swimmer, but still a happy one. My longest workout is equivalent to the warm-up many swimmers do, but still there are few

leisure activities I enjoy more. I love the feeling of water—how you are immersed but also held. I swim laps alone but the water accompanies me. It refracts light, amplifies some sounds while muffling others, and helps me leave my worries behind. When I pull at the water, it pushes back; it's not a fight but a dance. Surrendering to and being in sync with the water has made me a better swimmer and when I float, a reverie.

Knowing how to swim I feel confident and relaxed in the water which is a big change. But to be clear, this only refers to a swimming pool. Open water, including lakes, rivers, oceans, and bays, intimate me and remain daunting. But like my bay swims, I still work to embrace them. I'm drawn to

open water, but often too scared to get in. In open water there is nothing to stand on, grab hold or push off of. You can swim all day and never reach the shore or touch the bottom. There is there no painted black line like there is in a pool to guide you. You must look to the landmarks around you and the shore to see if you are generally going in the right direction, but the tides can override your best efforts if you get in at the wrong time or place. I joyfully swam for hours during the past summer in the warm, clear Pacific Ocean off of Maui, but I kept very close to the shore and had the sandy bottom always in plain sight. The water in the San Francisco Bay isn't anything like Maui and instead of beckoning, it deters you, rolling dark and green, murky and slightly polluted.



Some swimmers will go for the whole route. My goal is to get in. Map courtesy of the author.

It's the end of October and the weather on the day of our swim is perfect, with an unusually warm high of 80 degrees and clear, sunny skies. More important, the water temperature at 63 degrees Fahrenheit is close to the highest it will be all year. Hardly warm, water here peaks at 63–65 degrees Fahrenheit during the months of September and October. Jonathan, his 15-year-old daughter Hannah, her friend, and I arrive at the marina at close to 8:30 a.m. and are met by a group of ten others, including the boat skipper and owner, Gary Pursell, who stands at the helm. The boat is a beautiful 36-foot-long, white yacht named *Benaut* with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and bathroom below deck. "Huddle 'round," Gary directs us before we launch and we gather next to him at the back of the boat.

"There are three rules when you are out in the water today with your pod of swimmers," he says. "Stay together, stay together, and stay together." There are two other rules it turns out: you have to wear a bright colored buoy that snaps around your waist so you can be seen if you happen to get swept out by a current, and you can't flush any toilet paper in the boat's bathroom or it will clog.

I had planned to swim with Jonathan at my side, and the degree to which I trust him is the main reason I agreed to do the swim at all. But once we got sailing, Jonathan introduces me to his friend, Beth Miller, who will be swimming a much shorter distance, and encourages me to join her instead. I blurt out to Beth almost immediately how frightened I am to get in. I explain that the farthest I usually swim is a mile and I swim very slowly. Beth, who is about my age, has short, curly salt-and-pepper hair and muscular, tanned skin that reveals her love of open-water swimming. She quickly agrees that I should swim with her pod. She is friendly, speaks with a candid tone, and works, I learn, as some type of court-related counselor.

"Our pod will be slow," she says and will be made up of herself, me and three other women for a

total of five. "Whenever you want to get out, you can." I tell her about the near drowning experience I had in my 20s, and remarkably she tells me she too has a deep fear of getting in the water.

"During a swimming lesson as a child, a camp swim teacher who was frustrated with my hesitation to put my head in the water, forcibly held my face down," she tells me. I stare back at her in horror and disbelief.

"The experience has left me always feeling fearful before a swim." I'm impressed by her ability and willingness to swim—including in open water—after such a traumatic event and encouraged to have a kindred spirit on board who shares a former bad swimming experience. I also come to find that all four women in my pod have swum to Alcatraz, so over all I'm in great company. Additionally, we are to be accompanied by a kayak and a motorized raft called a Zodiac with two guys whose job it is pull you in if you need it. The bay's currents, I'm told, in specific spots of the swim make being swept out a real possibility.

Once we set sail, the Golden Gate Bridge is straight ahead and the Bay Bridge and San Francisco on our left. It's an amazing view and smooth ride, but I don't enjoy it. As I stare into the dark, green water, my feeling of dread grows and enthusiasm dwindles. The boat continues on as we veer to the north. We pass Mount Tamalpais and cruise under the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, which connects the east bay to Marin.

"Whoever is getting in, you have about 10 minutes," Gary, the skipper, announces. The group of four women I will swim with starts to peel off layers of clothes and put on their gear. I join them and quickly and pull on my gear which is two swim caps, my short fins, and the goggles Jonathan loaned me that have far-sighted vision correction. "You need to see!" he exclaims along with the advice he always stresses when we swim which is to just keep breathing. "Imagine how

impossible it would be,” he says rhetorically, “if you were trying to run with your eyes closed while holding your breath?!”

This being the “warm-water” season, none of us wear wetsuits. Beth wears a colorful swim vest that zips up but no fins. I start salivating and feel like I might get sick. I announce to Beth that either I’m going to throw up or burst into tears.

“This is the hardest moment of the whole swim,” she says reassuringly, “right before you jump in. It’s going to be good after that.”

Beth is not alone in her thinking. Natalie Coughlin, who became the first U.S. female athlete to win six medals in one Olympics, said she loved swimming but hated getting in the water, and Nathan Adrian, an American five-time Olympic gold medalist, called getting in the

water “the worst part of every swimmer’s day” (NBC Olympics). Without delay, the four women including Beth, get in the water one by one, but I’m too anxious to see or hear them. I stand alone at the edge of the boat and it feels like a plank walk. The motor is off and the boat gently rocks. I look at the water below and the distance seems not like three or four feet but more like ten. There are people telling me to jump in and I think I hear Jonathan counting down. But their voices sound like they are coming to me through a long tunnel, drowned out by the much louder voice in my head questioning why I would choose to leave the safety and comfort of the boat for the water below. But I do jump, and just like that, in a blink of my eye I am encased in the coldest dark I’ve ever felt. Given the little bit of height I’ve jumped from, I sink deep into the water like a stone. As I stare frantically into the dark, green, murky water, all I can think is that I’ve made a terrible



Approaching the bridge with my pod. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.

mistake. I am the swimmer Jonathan warned me not to be, who cannot see and isn't breathing. The breath in my lungs, acting like a balloon, helps to me to float upward as well as the salt water which is more buoyant than fresh water. When I surface, I am completely disoriented. I cannot see the other swimmers or catch my breath. Feeling lost and breathless, the last thing I want to do is put my face back into the water. I gasp and try to consciously inhale as I paddle clumsily. The proper term for what I was experiencing was a lesser version of cold water shock. The temperature of the water that day was more than 30 degrees colder than my own body temperature and my body responded by sending blood immediately to where it needed it most—my heart. Unprotected immersion in the range of water temperature that day of 63–64 degrees is only slightly dangerous. But swimming in water between 50 to 60 degrees and below can cause huge increases in your blood pressure and heart rate and a total loss of breathing control. The pool temperature range for Olympic swimming competition is 77 to 82 degrees and now I know why.

I hear a guy on the Zodiac raft yelling “swim to your pod!” and I attempt to manage my breath so that I can put my head back down and swim freestyle, but I can't. Swimming breaststroke, I manage to join the other swimmers but I feel like we aren't moving. A short time later I hear someone shout, “Back in the boat!” I look up and see the boat maneuvering closer to us and slowly we all get back in.

“A strong current going the other way,” Gary explains. “You were never going to get anywhere.” The boat travels about half a mile or so and we are given the okay to get back in.

Jumping back in is not nearly as intense, but the shock of the cold water has not dissipated. I resort again to swimming breaststroke so I can both breathe and see my way, and I quickly join my group and follow them from behind.

Beth stops several times to yell back at me, “Are you ok? Do you want to continue?” I give her the thumbs up, and we keep going. With more focus I get my legs kicking and arms moving. “Head down,” I tell myself. “Breathe; blow all the air out and make bubbles,” which is what I and every child are told repeatedly when learning to swim. In a matter of minutes, the water releases its choke hold and I am again in control of my breath. Although I have little sense of direction, I have acclimated to the water and, to my own surprise, I'm no longer cold. Out here, my chart-busting BMI works to my advantage, creating an internal wetsuit. It's a physical trait critical to survival in cold water that I happily share with seals, whales, and other mammals whose blubber protects them. Women generally have a higher percentage of body fat than men and it provides better insulation and buoyancy, which makes me consider how naturally adept women are in water (Hamilton (n.d.)). With the shock gone, my breath back, and the pod of women close to me, I put my head down and swim freestyle.

I think nothing of what's in the depths beneath me and become conscious of slowly relaxing into the water. I swim, I breathe, and I'm not cold. I feel good; I feel strong. I make more “ok” signs to Beth and to the guys on the Zodiac. I close my eyes and swim, just like I do in the pool. Even out here, miles from the shore, I have found my breath.

With the tide, my flippers, and the pod to guide me, I swim more than a mile before being waved back in. I am the last one to hoist myself out of the water using the steps on the back of the boat. Back on board, everyone puts on warm clothes including sweatpants and long, heavy swim jackets. One of the swimmers is visibly shivering and puts on a hat and socks. Perhaps it's the relief of being out of the water, but I don't feel the cold. I stay in my suit and warm myself in the sun.

“How was it?” Jonathan asks.

“I loved it,” I say. “But getting in was tough. Luckily,” I joke, “no one can hear you scream underwater.”

I thank Beth and the other women in my pod profusely for their support. Beth, who put on a wildly colorful pair of warm tights and body-length jacket over her swimsuit, congratulates me.

Several swimmers ask me if I’m going to get back in to swim under the San Rafael Bridge.

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly. I feel like I’ve accomplished my goal and stared some old fears right in the face.

“You’re a good swimmer,” Beth tells me. “You are a strong swimmer and you have a beautiful stroke.”

I’m flattered and really appreciate her saying this, but I feel that my stroke, while basically correct, is far from anything resembling beautiful. Back at home, lap after lap, I am constantly adjusting my reach, the curve in my arm, the position of my hands, and the rotation of my head. I try to stay conscious of inhaling through my mouth and slowly exhaling all my air through my nose before my next breath. But I often fail to extend my arms forward enough in the water before I begin to pull them back, which awkwardly cuts short my propulsion. My kick is also off, sometimes too much or not enough, where my legs then drag behind me. My grab of the water is also weak and finally, I’m not able to breathe on both sides. The repetition of swimming laps lends itself in the best and worst way to a never-ending inner monologue about my skill level, but regardless of my string of technical errors, freestyle is the only stroke I swim where I can create any rhythm or speed.

Evolution of Freestyle Swimming

Going back to the sixteenth century, breaststroke—not freestyle—was the preferred method to swim. Breaststroke looks similar to a swimming frog, where your arms and legs move together in wide scooping movements. The breaststroke, was swum originally with your head always held completely up and out of the water where you could breathe freely. During the eighteenth century when competitive swimming events were first organized in England, almost all swimmers competed doing breaststroke, and it was considered to be more graceful than other ways of swimming, which was favored over speed (Colwin 2002). Both Jonathan and I remember breaststroke and sidestroke (a one-sided version of breaststroke) as the only strokes our mothers ever did and we assumed it was to keep their hair from getting wet. Sigmund Freud is said to have favored the breaststroke to keep his beard dry (Sherr 2002).

Historical references to swimming outside of Europe, however, show the evolution of other strokes, including freestyle. Early colonizers from England noted that in the United States a style of swimming very different from breaststroke was being practiced by Native Americans. William Byrd II, the founder of Richmond, Virginia, wrote about learning to swim from their example: “Several of us plunged into the river....One of our Indians went in along with us and taught us their way of swimming. They strike not out both hands together but alternately one after another, whereby they are able to swim both faster and farther than we do” (qtd. in Colwin 2002, 14). This hand-over-hand stroke was also observed in the Mandan Indians, who were North American Plains Indians that traditionally lived in semi-permanent villages along the Missouri River in what is now North Dakota (Catlin [1844] 1973). Artist George Gatlin ([1844] 1973), on his travels through the American West, described it as “quite

different from...the usual mode of swimming, in the polished world” (97). Gatlin ([1844] 1973) further described the way they swam in a journal published in London in 1844:

The Indian, instead of parting his hands simultaneously and making the stroke outward, in a horizontal direction...throws his body alternately upon the left and the right side, raising one arm entirely above the water and reaching as far forward as he can, to dip it, whilst this arm is making a half circle, as it is being raised of the water behind him, the opposite arm is in a similar arch in air over his head, to be dipped in the water as far as he can reach before him, with the hand turned under, forming a sort of bucket, to act most effectively as it passes in its turn underneath him. (97)

The journal may have prompted a swimming exhibition in London that was held that same year, in 1844, where two Native Americans swam their early version of freestyle for the public to see. It was described as totally “un-European” by the press, which went on to say that the Indians “lash the water violently with their arms, like the sails of a windmill, and beat downwards with their feet, blowing with force, and forming grotesque antics” (qtd. in Sherr 2002, 60). It’s an apt description of how everyone swims freestyle today.

Almost 30 years later, twenty-one-year-old Englishman named John Trudgen won a race with a similar stroke. He “swam with both arms entirely out of the water, an action peculiar to Indians,” observed one person (qtd in Sherr 2002, 60). Trudgen is reported to have said that he learned the stroke from native tribes in Argentina. Regardless of its early aesthetics, by the first modern Olympic games in Athens in 1896, both European and American swimmers could see the necessity of going faster. In 1902, fifteen-year-old Dick Cavill, an Australian, performed another evolution of what was called the *Trudgen* but with his feet kicking. He said

he had seen a racer do the stroke, but that racer had learned it from Native people in the Solomon Islands (Sherr 2002).

In 1894, Archibald Sinclair and William Henry wrote an extensive book on swimming and described Cavill as “crawling” all over his opponents which may have led to the freestyle stroke to being referred to as the “crawl.” “The swimmer appears to be crawling over the water instead of being in it,” they wrote, “hence there is much splashing. It cannot be said that the action is graceful but it certainly is particularly speedy. Swimmers put their head down, keep their mouths shut and let their arms fly around” (Sinclair and Henry [1894] 1916, 89). There was no breathing technique that accompanied this, and early swimmers of the crawl swam as far as they could on a single breath, pausing to lift their head out of the water to breathe again.

Along with Native Americans, freestyle swimming is also assumed to have existed for ages among Polynesians and Hawaiians, born out of the necessity to swim quickly to catch a wave. It was in the early 1920s that Australian swimmer Cecil Healy forever changed the way freestyle is done and gave the swim breath its current significance. An Olympic gold medalist who helped to popularize surfing in Australia, Healy determined that if he wanted to use the crawl to swim a longer distance, a breathing technique was necessary. During his competitions, he began using the practice of turning his face sideways out the water to inhale and then exhale when his face was back in—a breathing technique which he said he had seen some version of being done by Native swimmers in Hawaii (Colwin 2002). It was noted that his new addition to the stroke, “raised eyebrows among classicists who perceived it to be ‘inelegant,’” but Healy went on in 1905 to swim what was then the fastest ever time in the 100-yard freestyle at 58 seconds (eleven seconds slower than the current record) (Lord 2020). He later wrote about his breathing method, emphasizing how important correct breathing is to being able to swim longer (Colwin 2002). “The head is

twisted toward the upper shoulder to facilitate the intake of air,” he wrote, “but the swimmer should make sure it is a twist only, for if the head is raised, the feet will unavoidably sink and break the balance of the body” (qtd in Colwin 2002, 19). It is instructive guidance which precedes the way Jonathan tells me to do the same—to simply turn my head in the water “like it’s a doorknob.”

Breaststroke, backstroke, and butterfly are still essential competitive swimming strokes but freestyle is now the most common and can be swum the fastest. Edwin Tenney Brewster, a science writer from Massachusetts, wrote a book in 1910 simply titled *Swimming*, which described freestyle as “the one stroke which is suited equally for speed and distance, for racing and pleasure, for the swimming-tank and the open sea” (47). Gradually methods and techniques emerged throughout the twentieth century and evolved into the current freestyle stroke. Today, in part due to the popularity of triathlons, there is a never-ending supply of instruction for proper freestyle swimming and breathing. I looked through many websites, read books, and received advice from Jonathan and the lifeguard at the pool where I swim. I eventually settled on a short YouTube video narrated by Robert Bowman who coached twenty-three-time Olympic gold medalist, Michael Phelps (The Swim Channel 2009). The coach intersperses a clip of Phelps swimming with a description of how he breathes. Like the hull of a ship, he explains, your head when you swim pushes the water forward and creates a split in the water called a bow wave. As Phelps turns his head it looks as if he is opening his mouth below the waterline, but he is actually taking his full breath inside the small dip of the bow wave. Out in the open water, however, a perfect bow wave, even one made by Michael Phelps, can be flooded by choppy waves which means you get a mouthful of water. Swimming in the ocean requires technique but also some tweaks and adaptations.

I have always believed freestyle is the standard of all distance swimming, but, to my surprise, two of

the four other women in my pod, including Beth, were swimming breaststroke almost the whole time. Beth tells me that it’s due in part to never being able to completely get past the incident where her swim teacher held her head down in the water.

“I prefer the breaststroke because I can see and breathe in a way that makes me feel more secure.” On that terrible day at camp so many years ago, Beth recalls that after her teacher let go of her head from under the water, he laughed. But the incident didn’t keep her from swimming, and she went on to become a junior lifeguard.

“I really love the water. Swimming,” she says, “is like having your body kissed all over.”

The other woman doing breaststroke during our swim was Leah Carroll. Fifty-seven years old, she has short brown hair and is very thin and petite. It was she I saw visibly shivering and struggling to get warm after her swim. Leah, who was born on the east coast and has lived in the Bay Area for more than 30 years, has only been swimming regularly for the last six. Leah and Beth are both regular swimmers at Keller Cove.

“With breaststroke and backstroke there is always enough air,” Leah says. “Your face is out of the water. When you swim freestyle, you have to force yourself to keep your face in even when you are running out of air.” Recently she swam to Alcatraz and managed to include freestyle.

“So, what would you tell people who aren’t going to swim competitively?” I respond, “Who are neither worried about how far nor how fast they go? To not just think about their breathing?”

“Yes,” Leah replies. “Do what you can do. Listen to your own body and just get as much air as you need.”

Leah and Beth are a mind-boggling revelation to me. Fear and love of the water don’t cancel each other out; they coexist. In the open water, I

can embody trauma and panic, new and old, but also healing. For Beth, open water is like a kiss, and for me it's a synchronous invigoration and centering. I had spent so much time researching swimming experts to get my freestyle stroke and breath right, but these women in real time showed me you can reasonably choose to do

breaststroke and not put your face in the water at all. Because of the invitation to swim in the bay and the opportunity to do it with the strong women in my pod, I realized that swimming in open water is as much about taking control as it is letting go.

Under the Bridge

More than an hour after I had finished my swim, Gary announces to those of us still on board that we are approaching the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and if we are swimming this section, we

should prepare to get back in. For this stretch, only the boat would accompany us since the Zodiac and kayak were now trailing Jonathan's pod of swimmers who were well into their



In the shadow, following my pod towards the San Rafael Bridge. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsch.

eight-mile swim. I watched nervously from the boat at one point as one of the swimmers in his group started to slowly drift away. Eventually, the Zodiac raft picked her up and took her out of the cross current she was stuck in.

The women in my pod kindly encourage me to join, telling me how amazing it will be to swim under the bridge. They all jump in, but I remain at the edge of the boat, still ambivalent. The bridge loomed ahead, massive and beautiful. This is somewhere I may never swim again I think, and I decide to get in. Suddenly, I realize that I've forgotten to reattach my hot-pink buoy, and I scramble to find it and then snap it on around my waist.

"Hurry, go now" someone on the boat says, wanting me to swim together with the other women

who are moving steadily farther away and toward the bridge. I jump in, and if it's even possible, the water feels colder now, maybe because I'm so warm from sitting in the sun. I swim hard to get warm and catch up. The boat leaves and sails ahead of us towards our agreed upon meeting place, a small island called Red Rock that sits right beyond the bridge.

I swim freestyle as fast as I can and before too long when I turn my head to breathe I see the dark shadow of the bridge hanging over me. Finally, I am right underneath it. I stop trying to catch my pod and instead take in the view. I was told earlier to swim backstroke to view the bridge's underside, but instead I float on my back for several minutes. I drift past the bridge's enormous concrete pylons and I can see and hear the cars zooming above. I wonder if the people



Pausing under the bridge with my pod. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.

in the cars see me too and if they do, what they think? I wonder if they would they say I'm foolish or brave, or both. I am excited and astounded to be there but also slightly nervous. My eye catches water moving against the pylons which creates an illusion of a strong current, and it begins to trigger my fear of a riptide. It's time to get moving. Before I flip over and begin to resume swimming freestyle, I take a hard, last look up, trying to imprint this view of the bridge into my memory, quite certain I will never find myself here again.

Once I'm on the other side of the bridge, I switch from freestyle to breaststroke so I can get my bearings. San Francisco and the Bay Bridge are

in my line of sight, but my pod, not having taking time to float as I did, is off in the distance. I'm not even sure they know I decided to get back in. The boat is no longer nearby and has parked itself close to Red Rock, in between me and the group in which Jonathan swims. With all the other swimmers and the boat being equally far from me, the anxiety that began to surface under the bridge now fully erupts. Red Rock suddenly seems impossible to reach and I begin to panic, believing I don't have the strength to make it. My fear feels mostly existential. Only open water gives me this deep primordial sense of being alone, being weak and vulnerable. Diana Nyad, a marathon swimmer famous for her many long-distance swims and for being the first



*On the other side. Happy to be catching up with my pod and ready to get back in the boat.
Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.*

person to swim from Cuba to Florida without the aid of a shark cage, wrote that swimming is “the loneliest sport in the world” (qtd. in Kormann 2012). In a pool, I feel contained and safe but now I feel as if I may disappear at any moment. “In a pool,” Carolyn Kormann (2012) writes, “you’re staring at a line on the bottom; in open-water, you’re mostly staring into a murky, hallucinatory vastness.” Instead of pushing on, I stop and tread water. Once I stop the physicality of swimming and defer to my mind, I become even more afraid. I try to comprehend how big this body of water is, and how deep the water beneath me. This is the knowledge you have in open water that can liberate or terrify you, and for me in that moment it was the latter. I yell “hey,” just to hear my own voice but no one can hear me. Finally, I raise my hands in the air and do a weak wave. Immediately, the boat begins to circle back toward me.

“Are you ok?” someone on the boat yells out when they get close. “Do you want to get in?”

I yell back at them no and that I’m fine, which is both true and not true and they return to their prior position. My only option is to get back to swimming. Open water swimming allows for a cadence to my breath and stroke that can’t ever happen the same way in a pool—it’s the difference between running around a track versus running on a trail—and it is with this rhythm that I cease being afraid. I put my head down and stop thinking and start steadily swimming. The tempo of my breath, in very little time, begins to create order and make peaceful sense out of the incomprehensible vastness of the ocean. When

I jumped off the boat and into the water I disappeared, and with my breath I have reemerged—I exist. My swim breath forms a bubble around me, and I start to feel calm and protected. I turn my face up towards the sky and take in as much air as I need, just as Leah advised me to do. The farther I swim, the deeper I go inward and away from my fear of the water. Fifteen minutes or so later, together with the other swimmers, I finally reach Red Rock. I feel triumphant but equally relieved to get back on the boat.

As we near the marina, I thank Beth and Leah, my pod, and the others again for their support, for the amazing experience I’ve just had. Before she leaves, Beth tells me that this is one of her best open-water swims.

“I think it’s because I talked with you and told you my story,” Beth says, “It helped me.”

I am humbled by her comment and also full of gratitude. I think for women who have had a traumatic experience in water, open water can an additional sense of vulnerability but also the possibility of transcending the past. The women I swam with chaperoned my experience of a new inner and embodied confidence. They lent me so much encouragement, and in the end defied my ideals of what it means to successfully or correctly swim and breathe in open water; they simply pursued a sport they love with the breath techniques and strokes that suit them. If I ever return to the big, dark, cold, and open water of the San Francisco Bay, my method for swimming will be to just keep going, however far, in whatever way, and to breathe whenever I damn well please.

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