

By immersion

Recently, I've started taking my children swimming on a Tuesday evening. When I say 'swimming', I mean they disappear to do bellyflops up the deep end while I drift up and down the length of the pool trying to keep warm and trying to keep an eye on them – which is difficult since I am severely short sighted. Apart from the seriously dedicated lane swimmers, the pool is generally empty.

The first week I did this, I was swimming languidly along trying to pretend I was nothing to do with the wretched kids trying to drown each other and being yelled at by the pool attendants. As I was doing so, two ladies swimming side by side came towards me, chatting as they swam, as if in a coffee morning, or down the shops. As they passed, a drift of conversation came across to me.

'...sprinkle with cheese and put in the oven for thirty minutes at 180 degrees'
'can you eat it cold?'
'Yes, but it doesn't freeze well'.

I had a mad vision of Delia Smith in a swimming pool, or Jamie Oliver, the 'naked except for a pair of swimming trunks chef'. But before I could ponder more bizarre ideas, the ladies were steadily breast-stroking back towards me on their next leg. By now they had got on to sex. Better and better. Clearly swimming could be less boring than I had anticipated.

The next week, all was repeated. There were the kids seeing how long they could stay under water before turning blue and needing resuscitation, then pretending fatal injury to get me out of my beached whale impression in the 4 foot 6. And there were the ladies swimming and chatting in perfect synchronisation. They said hello as they passed. I said hello back and got a mouthful of water, - clearly swim/chat is a specialised skill. So they waited for me up the shallow end and we talked. They wanted to know the salient details of my life, kids and everything and I gave them the gen. We began to be friends.

Now this is a true story and I can't pretend to you that some great act of evangelisation then took place and that Kim and Jo got baptised (already being immersed) with a cloud of attendant angels. We chatted. We had a laugh. We promised to see each other next week. The thing that struck me was the unlikely nature of our encounter. Swimming (if you discount splashing about with a bunch of friends), is essentially an isolating activity. A pool full of echoes doesn't lend itself to social intercourse. Certainly the lane swimmers, with their strong easy strokes, do so in professional isolation. Iris Murdoch uses the image of a spa pool, shrouded in mist, as an image of our aloneness, marked by chance encounters, with people appearing and disappearing like ghosts, nothing enduring. For in a pool, you have no extra resources, none of the accoutrements of our usual identity.

So even in an empty pool on a Tuesday evening, the most unpromising of places, possibilities occur. Even in an isolating and vulnerable situation, when we are all but naked, relationship can and will occur. The question is, what can we do with these fragile threads, these beginnings? Something which doesn't look like anything can become significant and maybe it is *only* here that the new beginning will work, so that later you think back and say 'I would never have thought it!' Maybe this is true too then, of mission and evangelism, - we devise strategies which rule out the unlikely, the notional, the downright ridiculous. We leave out the situations when we have nothing to fall back on and are almost naked. But why should we think this if Christian faith says that God can use anything? This thought preoccupied me later when, as I left the pool, rat tails streaming, I saw Jo and Kim getting into their cars. I called 'goodbye' and they looked at me blankly. Clearly, they didn't recognise me with my clothes on...

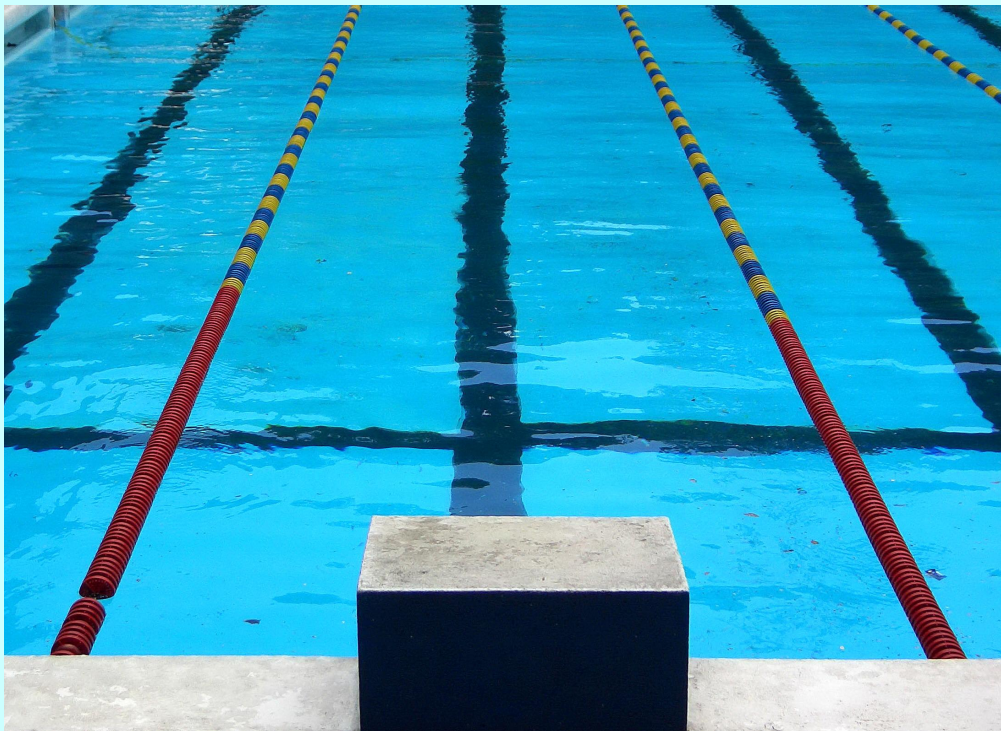


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