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## Hope floats as fear sinks

Do you have an inner voice — one that whispers in your ear when you most need it?

Mine speaks softly, gently, like a child whispering a last good night.

I have to be still to catch its quiet, breathy whisper.

Usually, it's a word of advice, saying something's wrong with this picture, or that I should take a chance that it's right.

This time it gave an order, louder than the water streaming in my ears in the fifth of eight adult swim lessons.

A few months back, I wrote a column about my water woes.

I took swimming lessons as a child but came away with an irrational fear of liquid and the belief that genetics denied me buoyancy.

I spent decades taking a shower without getting my face wet and years putting air quotes around the word swim. As in: "Maybe I should buy a new 'swim'suit'."

I went all the way to the ocean just to stick my toe in.

But when I watched my son in the wading pool last summer, I realized that the days of him agreeing to sit in 18 inches of water with me were limited, and I'd soon be left on the side.

I vowed to take swim lessons and wrote the column as my contract.

It served its purpose, shoving me in the door of a Geneva pool in November, along with friend Jan Endorf of Tobias, who wanted to learn the front crawl.

Instructor Michele Noel of Geneva was in the water when we arrived, swimming like a fish and

urging us to join her.

She preached the virtues of relaxing, spoke in soothing tones about the buoyancy of water.

Soon, she held me horizontally across the water and suggested I try the back float.

But that would require letting go of her neck.

So for the first few lessons we stuck to what I call the newlywed pose, as Noel spent much of the class looking like she was about to carry me over the threshold.

I got pretty comfortable there, any awkwardness of clinging to another grown woman was surpassed by the fear of letting go.

Slowly I let myself relax from "rigid" to "inflexible."

But the first time Noel relaxed her hold, panic seeped in like water in a leaky rowboat.

I flailed, clawed and sputtered. The nearby water aerobics class may have inched away from me like scared synchronized swimmers.

From then on, we worked on tiny victories.

Noel added an important weapon to my arsenal: teaching me to stand in water when the going gets tough.

I put my head underwater for the first time in my life.

By this time, Endorf was quietly back-crawling and floating around the pool, stopping occasionally to ask a question or offer encouragement. She received the short end of the lessons, the smart kid in a class with a problem child.

Noel assured me I was only a day behind her.

Since I was still clinging to her arm at the time, I assumed she meant in dog years.

But my friend's success spurred mine. You feel silly clinging to the teacher when the rest of the class is running around the playground.

Then, in Lesson Five, my breakthrough.

Maybe it was the swim cap. Maybe it was just time.

But I'm pretty sure it was the voice.

I was attempting to float on my back, Noel reminding me to arch my back, not my neck.

I heard one simple word.

"Relax . . . ."

Suddenly, I thought of all the people who e-mailed me after the original column.

"Want to see you succeed you know?"

"You swimmin' yet?"

"Everyone can float."

And I realized how silly this all was.

You have a cousin flying over Iraq and you can't FLOAT?

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## Swimming

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Your mother knocked breast cancer out of the park three times and you can't do this?

I spread my arms like a spider, puffed my cheeks like a blow fish and fell languidly into the water.

My legs floated up. I felt invisible hands lace under my back and sway me to and fro.

Needless to say, I didn't become an Olympic swimmer in the remaining three lessons.

I did pick up the stupid pink stick off the bottom of the pool. I learned a smattering of the glide and the crawl.

I can swim across the pool if I hold my breath.

But my flutter kicks are shallower as hummingbird's wing beat,

my whip kick nonexistent.

When I jumped into the foot in order to receive my certificate, I grabbed at Noel's head on the way down.

When we attempted to water in the final class, I went up on the bottom of the pool, ing my arms.

I need more lessons. But doesn't matter.

I realized, as Noel and I jumped up and down in the water after my breakthrough, look on her face a mix of joy and wonder that anyone could be the water she loves — that I wasn't learning rhythmic breathing and fish posture.

It was facing a fear.

And that courage — like voice — comes from within.

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