

OVER OUR HEADS

What becomes possible when our feet can't touch the bottom.

When I was nine or ten, I had one requirement for enjoying a swimming pool: my feet needed to touch the bottom. I knew how to swim. My dad had already taught me. I simply saw no reason to practice somewhere that swimming was mandatory.



The shallow end offered everything I needed. I could splash around, play, and occasionally demonstrate my swimming abilities. Then, whenever I felt like it, I could stand up.

That seemed like a perfectly reasonable arrangement.

My dad disagreed.

He kept trying to coax me into deeper water, convinced I would enjoy myself if I would give it a chance. I kept explaining that I was already enjoying myself. We had different visions for my aquatic future.

Then he changed his approach.

One day, I got out of the pool and started walking toward our blanket. Getting there meant passing the diving boards, where the water was about ten feet deep. I wasn't thinking about swimming. I was finished swimming. Whatever happened next was supposed to involve a towel.

Instead, two hands grabbed me from behind, lifted me off the ground, and sent me flying into the deep end.

I came up panicked. My feet searched for the bottom, which was considerably farther away than I preferred. I started swimming toward the edge, where my dad stood smiling.

Apparently, we were having two very different experiences.

I pulled myself out and demanded to know why he would do such a thing. He pointed out what he considered the obvious.

"Look! You can swim in the deep end!"

That was not the apology I was looking for.

His enthusiasm did nothing to improve my mood. I hadn't asked for a demonstration of my abilities. I had been walking toward a blanket. There ought to have been some protection for people walking toward blankets.

A few days later, we were back at the pool. I went straight to the shallow end and resumed enjoying myself with both feet comfortably within reach of the bottom. As far as I was concerned, the previous incident was behind us. My dad had made his point. I had registered my complaint. We could move on.

After playing for a while, I climbed out and headed toward our blanket. But as I walked past the diving boards, my dad appeared out of nowhere and grabbed me from behind again. He picked me up and tossed me into the deep end.

Apparently, our discussion had not produced the agreement I thought it had.

This time, I came up both frightened and furious. I began shouting my fury while swimming toward the side. Apparently, I could swim, breathe, and deliver a strongly worded objection at the same time.

My dad was delighted. More evidence that I could swim in the deep end. I was beginning to think he wasn't listening to the substance of my complaint.

Over time, this became a pattern. The initial panic gave way to anger, and the anger hardened into determination.

I was going to prevent this from happening again.

Walking around the pool became a surveillance operation. Look left. Look right. Locate Dad. I paid particular attention near the diving boards. Other children were enjoying their summer. I was monitoring a suspect.

The strange thing is that I kept swimming.

Every time I landed in the deep end, I made it to the side. My dad was right there, watching and ready to help. He knew I could swim. He also knew he would jump in if I needed him.

I knew I was angry.

That occupied most of my attention. I wasn't coming out of the water thinking, *Look what I just did*. I was coming out thinking, *Look what he just did*. We could have reviewed the exact same incident and filed completely different reports.

Then one day, enough time had passed that I let my guard down.

I had been swimming in the shallow end and was walking past the deep end when I caught a glimpse of my dad coming toward me. I knew what was about to happen. I had extensive experience with this particular approach.

Oh, the heck with this.

I jumped in before he could reach me.

He was not getting the satisfaction of throwing me in again. If anybody was going to launch me into ten feet of water, it was going to be me.

I wish I could tell you this was a moment of remarkable courage. Mostly, I wanted to ruin his plan.

But once I was in the water, something registered that I had managed to miss during all my previous visits. I was swimming in the deep end. My feet weren't touching anything. I could move around, keep my head above water, and decide where I wanted to go.

I didn't have to make an angry exit. I could stay.

The water hadn't changed. My ability to swim hadn't suddenly improved between leaving the edge and hitting the surface. But this time, I was paying attention to something besides my objection.

Then it dawned on me. This was what my dad had been trying to help me see.

All those times, I had been so occupied with how I got into the water that I had missed what was possible once I was there. I had spent weeks defending my right to stay in the shallow end, convinced I would be giving something up by leaving it.

Now I didn't want to get out. I've loved swimming in deep water ever since.

The shallows still appeal to me in other parts of life, though.

I like knowing what I'm doing. I like having enough experience to feel useful and enough understanding to explain what comes next. There is something reassuring about being able to put my feet down whenever I choose.

Following Jesus keeps bringing me into situations where that option isn't available.

Someone asks a question I don't know how to answer.

A conversation becomes more personal than I expected.

Someone trusts me with pain I cannot fix.

An opportunity appears, and along with it comes a fairly detailed explanation in my head of why somebody else would be better suited for it.

My first instinct is often to find the bottom. Reach for something familiar. Return the conversation to a subject I understand. Wait until I feel more prepared.

Preparation has its place. But I have also used it to negotiate an extended stay in the shallow end. There is always something else to learn before taking a step that requires trust.

Jesus' disciples knew that feeling. Several were experienced fishermen, yet following Him brought them into circumstances their experience couldn't manage. In Mark 4, Jesus told them to cross to the other side of the lake. They followed His direction and found themselves in a storm, with waves breaking into their boat.

Jesus was with them. He was also asleep, which they did not find particularly reassuring.

"Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

That is an honest question from people who had run out of things to stand on. They had followed Him, and now they were frightened. His presence hadn't prevented the storm. In their fear, they struggled to understand what His presence meant.

I recognize that struggle.

When I feel over my head, I want an explanation for how I got there. I want to know when the uncertainty will end and when I will feel capable again. Sometimes I am so occupied with those questions that I overlook the person in front of me, the next small thing I have been given to do, or the help God has already provided.

Sometimes God leads us into circumstances beyond our safe-zone. Sometimes an unexpected turn in life leaves us there. We don't always get to sort that out before we have to respond.

But being over our heads does not put us beyond His reach.

And His faithfulness means more than getting us back to familiar ground. We begin to learn that we can listen without having an answer. We can love someone without knowing how their story will turn out. We can take the next step without being able to explain the next ten.

I still feel resistance. I still have questions. Some days, I would appreciate a little more advance notice.

But there are people I would never have met and relationships I would never have experienced if I had stayed where my feet could touch. Looking back, I am grateful I didn't wait until I felt ready for all of them.

I would still be waiting.