

DIFFERENT STROKES

By Richard Taylor

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An open-water fanatic finds a solution to that bane of long-distance swimming – loneliness. Just take the plunge with a friend.

"The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty."

- from John Cheever's, *The Swimmer*.

Early in the summer, we stand among 50 mourners at a Norway Bay Cemetery to honour the memory of Jack, an old family friend. Beyond the sunlit graveyard you can see the Ottawa River through branches of a line of fragrant pines. After the service, my wife, Dale drops me off at the municipal wharf. I will be swimming to the funeral reception, three kilometres across the bay.

Recent heavy rains have left the water high and unseasonably cold. Before plunging in, I remind myself that death is a natural progression, a crossing of boundaries. A few lines of poetry from my friend, Michelle Desbarats' book, *Last Child To Come Inside*, perk me up:

*"Jesus was thinking, water, I can walk on it.
Now I'm always wondering, what would
have happened if I just swam."*

Swimming has been described as underwater flying. The key is to relax your movements, so that, like flight, it becomes an effortless poetry in motion. Surrealist painter Salvador Dali once claimed "the dream of flight is nothing but a memory of the state of weightlessness, which the unborn has undergone in-utero." This might explain why open water swimmers feel the desire to return to the depths of nature's womb.

With my eyes at water level, I keep our friend's cottage on the far point as a beacon, and settle into a long soulful freestyle. If one believes the speculations about man's aquatic phase of evolution, and if one reflects upon the webbings between fingers and toes, the more or less hairless, streamlined body, then swimming open water doesn't seem so frivolous. It's a healthy, practical mode of transportation that can also be erotic, dangerous, relaxing, philosophical, religious, and obsessive.

The brilliant, but troubled American writer John Cheever made a mess of his own life. He and his fictional characters always seemed to be looking, metaphorically, for some kind of spiritual healing light. Cheever's classic short story, *The Swimmer* was also made into a film starring Burt Lancaster. Middle aged Ned Merrill, the swimmer, clad only in swimming trunks, possesses an uneasy restlessness that one day leads him to go home from a pool party by swimming the backyard pools en route.

And so searching for my own way home to the light - 40 years to the month the *New Yorker* published Cheever's story about Ned Merrill's epic swim - I find myself moodily leaving the river to stroll among Jack's rowdy well wishers who are eating and drinking at his after-funeral-party.

Often, open water swimmers are defiant romantics, free spirits more at home in water than on land. Free or wild swimming can be solitary and lonely, so I decided last summer to make it social. When word gets out about my esoteric swims, I am invited everywhere to taste the waters.

At my friend Larry McCloskey's mother in law's cottage on Lake St. Peter, near the east gate of Algonquin Park, I suggest to Larry's wife Cara that we explore a bay of her lake she's avoided swimming since childhood. Normally she refuses to wear goggles because she doesn't want to see what is under the water. But I convince her otherwise.

After a rhythmic 15-minute freestyle, we slow down, and quietly breaststroke along the shoreline, inspecting the flowering lily pads. Then we submerge beneath docks and rafts, checking out the fish who bask in the shadows. Later in the chill of evening, as Cara lights a fire, she admits, "*Rick, that swim today was a religious experience. All I need is a woodstove, and a lake.*"

The next day we cram food, wives and daughters into the van and drive into the park to Canoe Lake. Larry, who wrote the young adult murder mystery, Tom Thomson's *Last Paddle* stands beside me at the rental dock that is swarming with tourists, some stuffed into canoes, and says, "*Did you ever see so many misfits in the wilderness?*"

Clad in life jackets, our girls settle shakily into a rental canoe and Larry sits in his one-man kayak, while I dive off the public dock, stroking towards the Bletcher Cottage, 4 kilometres away.



Larry & Rick

Martin Bletcher supposedly held the key to unlock the mystery behind the murder/suicide/accidental drowning of painter Tom Thomson. The inquest into Thomson's death took place at Bletcher's Cottage, now owned by our Ottawa friends Bob and Mary Crook. Another Ottawan, former Citizen sports columnist Roy McGregor, wrote a novel about the Tom Thomson mystery called *Shorelines*.

Even as one passes the locations where Thomson's canoe was found and his body recovered, many visitors to Canoe Lake will swear they have seen Thomson's ghostly canoe drifting towards shore. Thomson, arguably the most famous Canadian painter, was also an avid lake swimmer. So naturally, I'm keeping an eye out for him in the water.

Arriving at the Bletcher place, we learn that our friends are not home. So we head across the lake to Tom Thomson's Cairn, a carved totem pole that honours his achievements and death in July 1917. Larry's novel wisely leaves the mystery of Thomson's demise open to the reader's imagination. But as I continue swimming in Thomson's lake, my imagination dwells on poet Al Purdy who once described lake water as the mysterious everyday stuff you can drink or drown in.

Back at the Lake St. Peter cottage, I discover a 4-year-old Cottage Life magazine article about writer Greg Hollingshead and his remote Algonquin Park cabin. Hollingshead won the 1995 Governor General's Literary Award for his story collection *The Roaring Girl*. In 2002 while we were promoting our books together at the Ottawa International Writer's Festival I found him intelligent and affable. And so armed with the article's description about Greg's well kept secret from civilization, Larry and I bump along a logging road that cuts through the Canadian Shield. After several wrong turns and nearly tearing out the bottom of my van, we arrive at Cauliflower Lake. Larry unstraps his kayak, and I dive into the water.

According to the article it's a 10-minute motorboat ride, which means a 40-minute swim to Greg's cabin, one of only two properties on the lake.

Through a shallow, narrow gap that opens out into another concealed bay, we suddenly spot Greg's place among trees. Larry stops paddling and says he doesn't want to be first to the dock.

As I nervously breast stroke in towards the 1930's log cabin and its ramshackle outbuildings, I see the silhouette of a man. Closer to the dock I shout, "*Hi Greg, it's Rick Taylor. I wrote House Inside The Waves. We met at the Ottawa Writer's Festival two years ago*".

For a moment he is taken aback, then he says, "*Oh, hi there.*"

As I clamber onto the dock and Larry paddles up, Greg invites us in for a beer, and we realize this reclusive writer is glad to see us.

Inside his charming screened-in porch that hangs over the water he tells us about his upcoming promotional tour for his new novel, *Bedlam*. It deals with an infamous insane asylum in 18th century London. For a guy who spent the last five years writing about lunatics he seems sane. With his close-cropped beard, thick coiffed hair and horizon filled eyes, Greg looks like a writer's writer.

His work has been compared with Flannery O'Connor and Jean Rhys. Manuscript pages litter his wooden table. Glancing out at the serene lake, we understand why he savours the profound silence of this cabin in 100,000 acres of bush, rock and water.

Since I last saw Greg, he's had a hip replacement and his gallbladder removed. Larry and I, the picture of scrawny fitness, jabber about the need for writers to get active, and offer to let Greg try out the kayak.

After gleefully paddling around the dock area like a madman, Greg asks us how we are getting back to the far end of the lake. I slip on my goggles and tell him, "*I'm swimming.*"

Another sunny day, my friend Armand Ruffo, who teaches with me in the English Department at Carleton, suggests we swim at Marble Lake near St. Pierre de Wakefield. Armand hasn't been to his property on the lake since the publication of his last book of poems, *At Geronimo's Grave*, in 2001. His most acclaimed book, *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney* was made into a Hollywood movie. At the Gatineau shoot, actor Pierce Brosnan asked Armand for a signed copy of his book for Brosnan's father who had attended one of Grey Owl's lectures in England.

With frogs exploding near the water's edge, Armand eases his canoe into the lake. I dive in among reeds, then stroke beside Armand who is an elegant canoeist. Armand's mother was Ojibway and his father Italian, and Grey Owl once lived with his great-grandparents. So he was well equipped to tell the story of Grey Owl, the Englishman who reinvented himself as a Canadian Indian, a beloved conservationist and world famous lecturer and writer.

Armand's lakeside property is an overgrown clearing in the woods with a fire pit. Among the trees, we eat while Armand outlines the difficulties of working on his upcoming film, *A Windigo Tale*, compared to the uncomplicated luxury of writing a book.

I coax Armand out into the water. "Take longer, slower arm strokes. Really stretch it out, and accelerate through with your hands," I say, floating beside Armand. "Relax your breathing. Pivot your head sideways for air, just above the water line as your opposite arm reaches to grab water. Try not to waste energy. It's all about rhythm and getting a feel for the water."

For a few strokes he looks magnificent. Then his kick weakens. His arms begin to criss cross, and finally he stops.

We breaststroke further along, sniffing the scent of cedar and pine, "*If you could swim with the same ease you handle a canoe, you'd be all set.*"

We continue through a narrow channel that opens into a much larger section of the lake, then aim for a granite cliff.

Early one evening, my wife Dale slips into her kayak and skims across duck frenzied water above the falls at the old Mill in Manotick. From the bulrushes, I dive into the gamy Rideau River and swim hard to get free of the water rushing over the damn. Soon, we move in tandem through glassy water that shimmers with glorious sunlight.

I keep my head above water as my chest, stomach and lower extremities are groomed by the heaving tentacles of weeds. Also, I try not to dwell on the huge muskies who roam these waters. Casually stroking past some of the most expensive waterfront real estate in Ottawa, we chat with and wave at folks sitting on their docks.

Further along, I swim to a man pattering around his boathouse with two classic wooden boats. He tells me that the river clears up by the middle of the week, after the muck from weekend boat traffic settles down.

Later, I'm afraid to look down because it's not the middle of the week, and the weeds are getting much too amorous. I won't be able to swim all the way around the south island, so I wave Dale on in her kayak, then struggle out of the water.

Dressed a lot like Ned Merrill (or Burt Lancaster) from *The Swimmer*, I hot foot it up through someone's property and lope along the road towards the other side of Manotick.

A woman standing by her Toyota notices the incongruity of the situation and kindly offers to drive me to my van. Speckled with weeds, I sit sheepishly in the backseat. She giggles most of the way through the dubious explanation about my aquatic program. I decide not to elaborate on Cheever's notion about "the singular force of time through which one seems to swim."

This past summer I've learned that the joy and grace experienced in open water, the sense of spiritual renewal, is shared by many swimmers. I see triathletes in wet suits crossing lakes alone, or clusters of them keeping time with one another's stroke.

Many non triathletes swim as a kind of solace and therapy - solitary heads moving along a river or lake. Some swimmers drag a flotation device to caution motorboats. The slow progress of elderly swimmers can be seen at

almost any time, and in the coldest waters. Friends and lovers breaststroke, discussing the larger and smaller issues of life. There is no mistaking the sublime inner passion of aquatic minded souls.

As summer's end approaches, being in the water becomes somewhat of a mania. Near Perth, at Ernie and Susan's cottage, I swim around the big island of spring fed Ferron Lake. At Lise and Adrian's lake in Val des Monts, I accompany Adrian who, for the first time, swims to the other side and back. I also do a night swim with their guests, including, writer Melanie Little who wrote the collection of short stories, *Confidence*.

Near Buckingham, I spend a couple of days with my mentor from Carleton, writer Tom Henighan who reads me passages about swimming from the Odyssey. In the gloom before a thunderstorm, he bravely accompanies me with his canoe while I swim a long arm that joins Hawk Lake and Lady Lake. At Lac Sam with my brother in law Vic and our friend Dwight I swim out into the 120 meter deep lake for a chat with a family floating along on an unusual raft. Two teenagers read novels on lawn chairs while the family dog eyeballs me nervously and the father and mother prepare dinner on a barbecue.

My good friend Jocelyn, a budding writer who owns Trillium Bakery, invites me to her moose, ghost and bear haunted log cabin at Source Lake which she claims is the source of the Madawaska river, and I also swim it because it flows into the Ottawa river. A surfer friend, John March, whose Canadian Masters record for the 200 meter backstroke could only be bettered by the world record holder, now prefers the pleasures of soul swims. I try to keep up with his lithe freestyle as we swim narrow Lac Kingsmere, passing by Mackenzie King's boathouse.

For most of the summer I have been accompanied by my crazed Aquarian buddy Pete the cop who is a family man, triathlete, and reader of contemporary literature. For a lark, Pete and I swim the 4 kilometres, beach to beach, at Meech Lake in an hour. Like gentle souled Vikings, we ravage many secret lakes.



Meech Lake

By the end of September, after the beaches up in the Gatineau are closed for the season, after a record breaking deluge of rain from the tail end of tropical hurricanes drenches Ottawa, and after a long, well deserved Indian Summer, Pete and I are at Meech Lake, for one last swim.

Already the leaves are turning. Vividly rouged layers of mountains surrounding the lake seem to shrink distance, and enhance the clarity of the water. With uplifted hearts, Pete and I move through a liquid mirror. We stroke toward the sun - a ball of warmth sinking beyond the horizon.

In this pure, elegiac light, we swim as though we might be able to swim beyond the water.

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