

SWIMMING WITH ALBERT AND THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING

By Richard Taylor

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(Illustrations by Mark Cabuena)

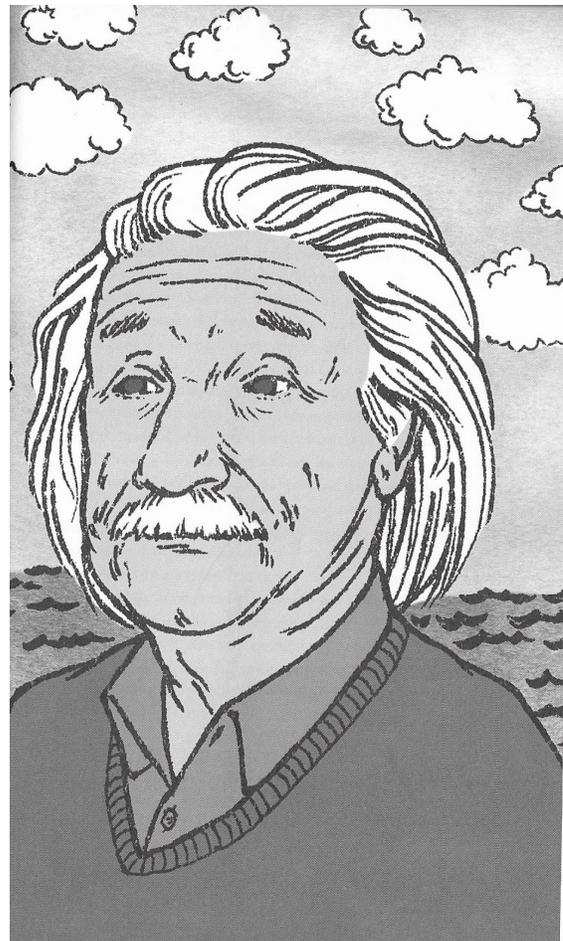
Richard Taylor has swum with the ghosts of history's greatest writers. He has jumped into Hemingway's pool, taken a dip in the Thames in the spirit of Lord Byron, and waded into the depths of Walden Pond in search of Thoreau's muse. Now he finds himself struggling to connect with one of the most prolific authors of the twentieth century: a Pisces who never learned to swim, yet chose to have his ashes scattered in a river.

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Swimming usually puts me in the mood for deep thoughts. But this time I was doing it ass-backwards, thinking deep thoughts before actually hitting the water. I always wanted to swim across the freezing, spring-swollen, fast flowing Rideau River just above the high-water rapids at Carleton University in Ottawa, where I am an untenured professor of writing, free to do and write whatever I please.

What led me to be illegally parked in the rain beside the Rideau River near the Life Sciences Research Building was a black and white photo of Albert Einstein ruminating by the water, with a caption that read, "Einstein did his greatest thinking while walking on the beach."

While writing a book about swimming around the world with writers, *Water and Desire*, I'd become intrigued by Einstein because, like me, he was a bit of a slacker, an outsider who didn't always like to follow rules. He was a



free-spirited water gazer, always brooding and taking notes; and he was a fellow Pisces. Decades earlier someone had given me a Pisces medallion decorated with two fish swimming in opposite directions, nose to tail, yin and yang: *February 20 - March 20: Artistic, Intellectual, Emotional.*

Einstein was a flighty Pisces, brilliant, reckless, imaginative and mischievous as hell. As everyone knows, Pisces are supposed to be mystically connected to water. But Einstein never actually learned to swim, though metaphorically he was never afraid to swim against the current. Like many people, Einstein found inspiration through his proximity to water. He loved moody beach reveries and sailing lakes and rivers. This was as important to him as being in the water is for swimmers. For someone who never swam, I found it strange that Einstein's ashes ended up in the Delaware River. It was his wish that he not have a final resting space, that his grave not become a shrine. Einstein knew that the moment his ashes touched the water molecules of his former being would begin a long untraceable journey into all of the world's waters, fed from the Delaware into the Atlantic and onwards to everything and everywhere. This meant, theoretically speaking, when I dove into the Rideau River, I'd be swimming with Albert.

Einstein spent the latter years of his life developing his theory of everything, hoping to unite the physical laws of the universe. He was seeking a theorem that might explain how all physical things in this world were connected. He never quite figured it out. But nature, it seems, already had.

A river, such as the one I was going to swim, is the opposite of entropy and randomness. It has total order; it is pure fluid movement, from source to finish. The end of the Rideau is about seven kilometers away and it empties into the Ottawa River, which flows into the St. Lawrence, where it meets the Atlantic Ocean (just like the Delaware) and connects the seven seas, ending up as evaporation, then returns to earth as precipitation. And so everything does seem to be connected.

I was searching for my own theory of everything (ToE) as I set out to swim against the rushing current, struggling with the link between Einstein and the world he left behind. Here I was, an untenured professor and author of three books and a gnarly work in progress, trying to connect with the most famed professor of all: a man who arguably accomplished more with his writing than Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, or any of his other contemporaries.

It was a spooky, early May evening, getting dark and it had been raining like the Bible for a couple of weeks. Einstein had once said something about there being enough energy in a glass of water to power a city like New York. There was enough energy in this out-of-control river to power the universe. Being a rebel who didn't follow rules, Einstein had inspired me. I was obsessed about doing this Einstein swim: me and Albert in the water, time like a river moving through its own dimension; the swim encompassing everything from fuck-you hubris to endorphin-buzzing fun. I had planned it like a military operation. And if I managed to pull off the swim, I was going to hotfoot it over to my English department's end-of-term get-together at the pub, still dripping.

When I rolled my car window down, I could see my breath billowing out into the cold, pouring rain. It felt like springtime was going berserk with fish, mud, worms, seaweed and frog slime, agitated by tons of rushing water.

Einstein didn't hang around beaches for the sand; it was the water. He was often photographed near water because, aside from trying to work out his ToE, he had many demons and desires. Gazing out at eternity, no doubt, working through those quandaries of physics, mathematics, chemistry and philosophy, and giving into a few glances at bathing beauties, must have made his teeth clamp down harder on the trusty pipe he always had in his mouth. "Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour and it seems like a minute. That's relativity," he once quipped.

In terms of my unorthodox Rideau River swim, I didn't want to draw the wrong attention from marauding university security guards who might feel duty-bound to kibosh my swim through a rushing river, so I decided I'd have to change into my Orca wetsuit inside the car.

Einstein was never photographed struggling into a wetsuit in a car, but I could imagine him standing in a wetsuit, all portly tummy - frazzled hair rammed into a bathing cap, his bushy moustache just so, coyly smoking his pipe, seducing the camera yet again.

Unfortunately, I hadn't removed my clothes in the front seat of a parked car for awhile.

It was like making love alone, all hot and bothered, struggling into my wetsuit, one leg at a time, coaxing the suit up delicately so I wouldn't rip

the thin neoprene skin. Once I had the crotch up snug, wiggling myself into a better position, I reached into the right arm, raised it, then pulled the sleeve up towards one shoulder in increments until I could sort of straighten my arm. I began inserting my left arm into the other sleeve. Finally, after inchworming the rest of the way into the tight human condom in a kind of reverse metamorphosis, I felt like lighting a post-coital cigarette. Except I wasn't finished.

I opened the car door and stepped out in bare feet onto the cold pavement. Through the pouring rain all I could hear was the roar of the river. Reaching around behind, I zipped up the back of my wetsuit, and Velcroed the flap to make sure my neck was sealed against the frigid water I'd be immersed in very soon. Then I twisted a moulded cold-water earplug into each ear, yanked my Speedo cap on and grabbed my goggles.

A savagely skinny guy decked out in Tour De France tights shouted as he raced by on his bike, "Dude, you're crazy."

But Einstein had done crazier things.

As a German Jew who had the moxie to criticize Hitler's Nazi Germany, he'd escaped to the fun and freedom of America, where he flirted with, shunned and danced with celebrities. His $E = MC^2$ had made the Atom Bomb theoretically possible, which eventually led him to become a pacifist, the Mother Theresa of science. When he was hounded by the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover (the FBI had a 1,427-page file on Albert), he took on the American Government. In the Red Scare McCarthy era, he bravely spoke out to defend the accused. His ideas led to the development of such things as lasers, solar power, the Internet, digital cameras and GPS. In his last decades he laboured tirelessly over his all-encompassing ToE. Imagine thinking you could deal with and control randomness and the disorder of entropy. No wonder he looked so haggard, even while sticking out his tongue in that famously reproduced 1951 image taken on his seventy-second birthday.

Einstein kitsch is an eighteen-million-dollar-a-year industry hawking (no pun intended against physicist, mathematician Stephen Hawking) goodies like Einstein lip balm, relativity watches, Einstein's energy bars (energy = mouth-watering chocolatey goodness²), Einstein dolls and $E=MC^2$ neckties. He's number five on Forbes list of the highest-paid dead celebrities after another Piscean, George Harrison, who was born on my birthday February 25, and who, in one of his last songs, wrote a line I'll always remember:

“And I’m a Pisces fish and the river runs through my soul.” His ashes were said to be scattered in the River Ganges. So I guess in some way I would be swimming in the Rideau River with Albert Einstein and my favourite Beatle.

I sauntered across the road to the river, sidestepping pieces of a broken beer bottle. In cold, wet grass I crouched down by a wall of boulders and hid my car keys.

Down near the water, I was concealed by trees. During the summer the water level in the Rideau River drops to a wimpy set of rapids. But with the spring runoff and torrential rain of the last two weeks, the river was high and flowing much faster than I had calculated. Unlike Einstein, math was never my strong suit. For a moment I visualized swimming across and back without getting swept over the rapids.

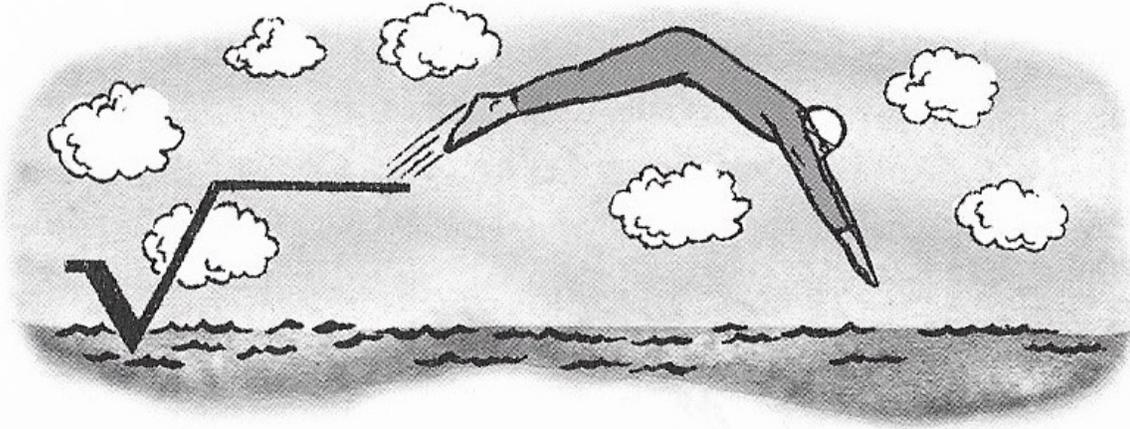
I eyeballed an eddy of water boiling near shore. There was my entry. I could see rocks and what looked like rusty hooks and the tangled nooses of fishing line. It would be embarrassing to dive in only to be garrotted by abandoned fishing lines. Squelching through mucky weeds, my feet sunk into cold ooze that made me shudder.

Suddenly, against a roiling Michelangelo sky, like some kind of time machine, the O-Train whooshed by, rattling across the iron bridge that spanned the river downstream. I felt a little like I was in a time warp. Years earlier as a head-in-the-clouds student, I had reclined in the sun along this river bank, drifting into metaphysics, reading Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Woolf and D.H. Lawrence novels. Later, as a head-in-the-clouds university prof, I had brought many classes down to write by the river to write. But I had never speared in to swim across.

I spit into my goggles to defog them. Einstein’s theory of relativity led to the notion of wormholes, mathematical glitches, shortcuts through space and time that might one day allow teleportation and time travel. Scientists claimed his theory meant the “dethronement of time as a rigid tyrant.” Swimming, especially through such dark, volatile, living water, might even feel like time travel.

I reached down into the stinging cold water to rinse saliva out of my goggles, then strapped them over my cap, fitting their suction into both eye sockets. I took a breath, and pierced the swift-flowing river.

Hyperventilating from the icy, burning skin of my hands, feet and face, and the adrenaline rush/fear of being swept over the rapids, there was no time to ruminate on Albert Einstein. Arms windmilling and legs kicking, I started swimming like a controlled maniac, aiming for an island of water-smoothed grass on the other side.



But inevitably, I settled into severe recriminations. Forget the authenticity of hands on research in water. I could have skipped this insane swim, dismissed Einstein as just another mad Piscean - one who had the good sense to ponder the quandaries of his mystical love of water from inside a boat. I should have stayed at home, writing about or researching some other famous ghost I could swim with in less harrowing circumstances.

The powerful current was unnerving. Einstein said the universe is endlessly expanding, and I could relate to swimming in something endlessly expanding. Gravity is about pull, which always brings one back to desire. I swam harder, lifting my head up, checking to see if I was going straight across. I wasn't. I was being taken downriver to the coiling white-water of the rapids. Swimming across the mighty flow of coursing water, so organic with new spring growth, it seemed as though I was being churned out of the bowels of nature herself.

Finally, I glided to the other side of the island, just beyond the pull of the rushing current. I treaded water for a short breather, though it also meant remaining in murky depths with who-knows-what creatures of the deep. Hauled out of the Rideau River over the years I'd seen too many water snakes, snapping turtles, 10-45 pound pike and muskellunge and half-

submerged deadheads. My fear, though, was purely psychological, because nothing in this water was worse than the power of the river itself.

Thrashing in a bit of a surging panic, worried about the current and the darkness below, I headed upriver, or what I thought was upriver. In fact, I was downriver from my projected calculations, swimming towards the other side a lot closer to the rapids than I should have been. With my heart hammering from the thrill of the swim and the fear about being cut into ribbons over the rapids, I picked up my pace. Swimming like a sidewinder, I was losing my position and in jeopardy of going over the falls. Instead of achieving something mildly heroic, or at least acceptably eccentric, I could be torn up over the rapids like some drippy idiot who would have to be rescued - lacerated and bleeding - from a misguided attempt to connect with a fuddy-duddy genius who never learned to swim. I kicked harder, dug each stroke deeper, and powered on, hoping my strength would last till I got to the other side.

Through amber shallows I started seeing a rocky bottom, which was comforting. In desperation to get across without being sucked downriver, I dug deeper, until I actually touched something. Later I would discover a slice across the palm of one hand I'm sure a fortune teller would have a field day interpreting.

Grabbing handfuls of branches along the banks to secure my footing in sludge, I just managed to stand up, feeling the muscle of the Rideau still trying to suck me down the drain. But I had made it across.

I popped out both earplugs, shifted my goggles up onto my Speedo cap and grovelled around until I found my hidden car keys. I didn't take off my cap because my hair would look way too much like Einstein's, as though I'd stuck my dick into an electric socket and left it there in search of stimulation.

Now, still buzzed on endorphin and adrenalin, and with a dopey grin on my face, I broke into an easy trot, heading across campus towards the Unicentre to the English Department get-together, feeling cockier than hell.

After elbowing through a surprised crowd of smokers outside the building, I was ambushed inside by another crowd. Someone said, "You look like that actor in the movie who swims home from pool to pool around his neighborhood. Burt Reynolds."

“Actually, it was Burt Lancaster,” I said. “In New York I swam in the pool that inspired John Cheever’s short story and film *The Swimmer*. I interviewed his ninety-year-old widow, Mary.”

That pretty much satisfied everyone.

In black neoprene glory I strolled into the university pub, where my fellow teachers and professors chatted at tables loaded with pitchers of beer. My less enamoured colleagues stared at me with their mouths open; my friends’ eyes lit up; smiling patrons around the bar chuckled and a few pointed in my direction.

Because I obviously had no money or pockets in my anatomically smooth Ken-doll wetsuit, Paul, the diplomatic chair of the English department, who is also an avid swimmer, said he’d be happy to get me a drink at the bar.

Sipping a drink on the edge of conversations about dire academic politics, I stood in my own gathering puddle. I didn’t know how I could casually announce that I’d just been for a bracing dip with Albert Einstein. I didn’t want to mention that when Einstein came up with his general theory of relativity, he had been unable to get a university teaching job because of his cavalier attitude toward academic authority.

My friend Armand Ruffo, author of *Grey Owl: The Mystery of Archie Belaney*, who had gone lake swimming with me, grinned like a Cheshire cat. “Rick, if I’d known you’d be in your wetsuit, I’d have brought my trunks.”

An unhappy-looking manager arrived. “Excuse me, sir,” he said. “You’re in bare feet. You’ll have to leave the bar and get a pair of shoes.”

Always an individualist, and consummate outsider, when Einstein sat with his legs crossed and wearing a suit and tie during his American citizenship ceremony in 1940, he wasn’t wearing socks with his shoes. Barefoot genius, I thought. Pure genius.

I downed my drink, thanked Paul, waved to my colleagues, and happily left the bar.

Outside in the rain, still pumped from my swim with Albert, I headed to the cool smell of the river and my car, thinking about the search for my own

ToE. Here I was in my late fifties, in a wetsuit, feeling a powerful connection with the most brilliant thinker of the twentieth century. I'd become enthralled by Einstein's mathematical and scientific genius, even though in school I was the worst student in math and science. I needed the elbow room of poetic licence. I failed grade nine math, twice.

Staring at the rushing Rideau River, I realized I was looking at time and space made concrete. I wondered what Einstein (the guy who invented the lost-in-thought pose) thought about towards the end of his life when he was so often photographed gazing out at water: Did he ever think he should have learned how to swim? Did he worry about the fate of our planet? Did he wonder what it would have been like sleeping with Marilyn Monroe, nuzzling those luscious breasts and thighs? More than likely, like most of us in quiet moments, he'd be having a bout with mortality's ever-ticking clock - a bout his highly-evolved, bent sense of humour would probably help him win.

He was a man who had known towering sorrow and triumphs that shook the world. He was a scientist who had the balls to keep searching for a ToE and who might have figured out the wrinkles of time travel. He was a water-inspired Piscean who, within the confines of time and his expansive mind, could remove his clothes and leap into the water, stroking through eternity - without even getting wet - sticking out his tongue for the sheer joy of being forever alive. Time as a rigid tyrant be damned.