

Swimming with My Dad  
Rebecca Nibley

I am four years old, and my chin-length blonde hair has highlights of green streaks running through it. The green streaks are not a fashion statement. No, they are from the chlorinated water that I practically live in this time of year. Summers are very dry and very hot in Utah, and the Provo public pool is a popular spot for our family as well as many others. I was born in July and—like my astrological sign (the crab)—I love the water. I love splashing with my older brothers as they take turns staying with me and watching me in the shallow end of the pool, even though now I am pretty sure they would have preferred more athletic activities in the deeper water.

We go almost every day but Sunday. And about once a week, Daddy has time to come with us. When he does, he always takes me to the slightly deeper water, and, holding my hands in his, teaches me to kick with my feet like flippers. Every week he lets go of my hands and backs up a yard or two, while I paddle my feet like crazy, reaching my arms out desperately towards him. He shows me how, if, instead of grabbing for him, I stroke the water with my arms as I kick my feet, I can reach him more quickly and keep my head above the water. This swimming maneuver is called the “dog paddle,” and I’m getting pretty good at it. I can make it about halfway across the 25-foot pool before I start to lose my stamina and begin to go under—at which point Daddy scoops me up in his arms and tells me what a good job I’ve done.

But Daddy was never one to settle for anything halfway. In retrospect, I don’t know if this was more a strength or a weakness in him. He always expected excellence, and was always critical when things were done, in his opinion, poorly. He was harder on himself than anyone else, of course, but for some of us kids, maybe for all of us at times, his expectations could be hard to meet, sometimes leading to frustration.

So of course, Daddy being Daddy, he was sure that I could do better. The next time he was with us at the pool was soon before my birthday, July 7th. I was about to turn five years old. Now I don’t know Daddy planned out what happened next or not. My guess is that he had decided that a little girl should be self-sufficient enough to swim across the pool on her own by the time she is five years old. I don’t know if kids had water wings in those days, but I know that I never did. He takes me to the edge of the pool where the water is about five feet deep. Starting with our regular routine, he backs up a couple of yards and then gestures for me to swim to him. I start off strong, and I reach him in no time—just as he backs up a few *more* yards. I paddle my little arms and legs like crazy, reaching the halfway mark of the pool in record time. He backs up again, and as I paddle, I feel my arms getting tired and my feet slowing down. Now, I am sure that if I can just make it to his outstretched arms, this time he will grab me as he has always done, hug me, and congratulate me for my excellent work.

But no —instead he’s backing up *again!* I’m sure that he knows I’m getting tired. Doesn’t he also know that it’s his turn to reach out for me and pull me to the safety of his arms? Doesn’t he remember that now is when he is supposed to give me a big kiss and take me to the concession

stand for a popsicle? Instead, he's backing up again—and just as I'm reaching him! What kind of cruel trick is this? Now I'm getting a little mad and a little scared. Is he just going to let me drown, here in the middle of a hundred people? I mean, I'm *four*! I'd like to make it to my fifth birthday next week! I call to him, "Daddy, Daddy, catch me!" I'm breathless with the effort and I swallow a little water as I bob up and down. He swims back a little closer towards me, but instead of grabbing me he says, "Come on! You can do it Becky! Look! Look! You've almost made it the whole way!"

I look up and see that the edge of the pool is almost within reach. So, I gather all my inner strength, all my desire to please him, and, with a little more adrenaline motivated by my anger at his insensitivity to my predicament, I continue. Slowly. I kick and stroke, kick and stroke, kick and stroke, and suddenly, just as I feel I can't do another stroke, I am in his arms at the far end of the pool! I did it! I made it! I am going to turn five years old in a few days, knowing that I have conquered the depths of the Provo public swimming pool! Such a great feeling!

Now, I later found out that I still had to practice. And I also learned that when Dad wasn't there to rescue me if something were to go awry, I still needed to stay in the shallower, safer waters for a while. But every day I learned a little more confidence and a little better technique.

Ever since, I have adored swimming. I was even on the local swimming team, The Provo Pikes, when I was seven and eight years old. I still remember my first race. It was against the mighty Pleasant Grove team, one of our greatest adversaries. I was terrified. I stood on my little stool, waiting for the gunshot that signaled the racers to dive in. I looked to my right, then to my left, to check out the competition, but there was no one there. It turned out that I was the only contestant in my category, girls ages eight and under. With that, I gained a little more confidence and when I heard the shot I dove in. I swam across that pool so slowly that the older kids watching from the sidelines were looking at each other like, "What is this kid doing here? She can barely even swim! At this rate they'll never even get to the rest of us."

But I persisted, and when I finally made it across, I was awarded my first blue ribbon! Even though I was the only one in the race, I was so proud! I took that beautiful blue ribbon home, showed it to my mother, and decided to iron it to take out the wet wrinkles it had from my clutching it so tightly in my fist. In an instant, it curled up into a tiny melted shredded ball. That was before I knew that irons have different settings.

Well, like my first blue ribbon, the extent of my swimming career was brief. There were two reasons for this. One was that, in my second season on the team, eight-year-old Kathy Nuttall showed up, and she was a fantastic swimmer! Before Kathy, I had always been the best in my category at the breaststroke (my coach always called that the lazy stroke), and in the medley relay my team of four seven and eight-year-old girls was undefeated. But I couldn't compete with Kathy. Coach put her on the relay team, replacing me. I was hurt for about five minutes, but lucky for me, I had just discovered my second reason to quit the team. I had found out that I could act! I was cast in lots of plays at BYU, and it was sooo much more fun than getting up at 6 AM and diving into a freezing pool.

More important than my short-lived sports career was the life-lesson I learned from my Dad. He always rooted for me; he always made me feel like I could do anything. When I was young, I was fearless in so many ways—so much so that I was not always wise in my choices. My father gave me so much support that I was still confident. But it was a different story as I grew older. When I became a teenager, I learned that Dad was not always going to be there, nor could he always fix my problems. I left for California the day after I graduated from high school, and though I visited frequently, I didn't return to live there for many years.

My father had taught me to swim, but he had also taught me to pray. In our home we always blessed the food at dinner and had regular family prayers where we would all kneel together. I was used to this, but when I thought about him during my personal prayers it seemed— I don't know— somehow weak. Like, how can my Dad need a higher power? Isn't he the highest power? One day in my teens, when he was reading in his bedroom, I walked in and asked him straight out. "Daddy, do you ever pray when you're alone?" I will never forget the way he looked deep into my eyes and said with tremendous fervor and emotion, "Becky, I kneel to pray every morning, every night, and a lot of times in between." I was genuinely surprised. That's when I realized that even my Dad needed help, and also that he had the humility to seek it.

He also taught me about the source of that help—the Atonement of Jesus Christ. I had to get a testimony of that for myself in my own personal prayers, But he was the one who put me up to it. To the logical mind, the Atonement can be a hard doctrine to believe as a literal event. And when I had to face life on my own, I found that, out in the world, people can be cruel and have less than virtuous intentions; that they don't always have *your* best interest in mind. I learned that there are natural disasters, and wars, and accidents. And all these awful things can even happen to even the best of people. I discovered that the world can be a scary, painful, and disappointing place.

So, where do I turn when my father isn't there? Especially when life becomes almost unbearably difficult? When I find that my whole world seems to be sinking around me? I just remember what he said in that swimming pool, and in that bedroom, and I know that I can reach out my arms to my Savior, and cry, "Help me Lord! I'm sinking! Don't you care? Are you just going to leave me here to drown? I thought it was your child, that you loved me, that you would protect and rescue me!" And then I can see the Savior reaching out his arms to me, and his loving voice gently say to me, "Come on, Becky, you can do it! Look, Look! You've almost made it!"

And I gather all my inner strength and all my desire to please Him, and with a little more adrenaline motivated by my anger at his insensitivity to my predicament, I continue. Slowly, wearily, I try a little longer, a little harder, believing that I can only because He believes that I can. Just as I knew that my earthly father would never have abandoned me in that swimming pool – that if it got just a little too hard to get to the other side by myself, he would've lovingly pulled me into his arms and carried me the rest of the way. He knew I could do it – he just wanted me to know *I* could do it. So, like my earthly father, my Heavenly Father expects me to do my best. To try to be more like Jesus every day.

But I also know that I am a lot like Peter. Walking on the water, towards Jesus, I can suddenly give in to fear, as terror replaces faith. And then, like Peter, I begin to flounder in the treacherous waves, crying out “Jesus, Jesus, save me! Carest thou not that I perish?”

And then I am reminded that whenever and wherever I start to sink, which is often, He will not only step in to help, to pull me out of the depths, but through his Grace, he will take me in his arms and carry me the whole way. His Grace is sufficient. He will always meet me exactly where I am.

Learning stuff is hard. It takes time and patience. But knowing how to do stuff is wonderful! And excelling in something is magnificent! And the only way to become an expert is to practice. Our heavenly Parents lovingly watch us struggling to learn. They already know we can do it, but they need us to know we can do it. So, they don't always step in as often or as soon as we would like. Not because they don't care, but because they care so much. And they want us to learn to be as they are. We made that choice in the pre-existence. We wanted to become celestial beings. Our free agency has brought us to this point.

So that is a lesson I learned from my dad. That with patience, and effort, and guidance we can accomplish all the things that we are called to do. That we can learn all the things that we need to learn and endure all the things that we must endure.

But it is only made possible through the Atonement of our Savior, He who took upon himself all the sins and the sorrows of the world, including yours and mine. His loving, outstretched arms are open and reaching for us as he patiently waits to embrace us as we finally, triumphantly, make it to the other side.