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Just Beneath the Surface

By AKIKO BUSCH

In graphic design, the word “river” refers to the white space between words that sometimes connects in a rippling vertical pattern down the printed page. Such a river is to be avoided because it can interrupt the flow of text in an irregular pattern and distract the reader’s eye from the horizontal progression of the printed words. But just as it may be a distraction, that space between words also confirms their meaning. If a river can both separate and connect on the printed page, it is capable of doing this all the more in the natural world.

My preoccupation with swimming across rivers started in 2001. A close friend had died, my own half-century mark was approaching and my 12-year-old twin sons were in an adolescent landscape furnished with clothes, language and activities all incomprehensible to me. There was little I could do about any of these things. But for that reason, it occurred to me to find a divide that could be crossed. And more and more I came to imagine that swimming across a river might be a way to do this. Now, six years and nine rivers later, swimming across rivers has drifted toward another purpose. It seems clear now, in that way that the unexpected can sometimes take hold of intent, thwarting and subverting it, that following the path of the river is as important as crossing it. A river can connect every bit as effectively as it divides.

Maybe because there is something so essentially primal about swimming, I had always thought of it as a solitary endeavor. In ordinary circumstances that’s what it tends to be. Swimming is, by nature, asocial; in the subaquatic realm, the human community is peripheral. The very substance of water puts you at a remove, and solitude is inevitable. You don’t speak, you can’t hear and though you may not be alone, it is easy to believe that you are. Swimming demands social disengagement, and unless you happen to be involved in some kind of synchronized swimming, contact and conversation are impractical. All of which is part of its beauty. In “Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero,” the British writer and swimmer Charles Sprawson goes further, suggesting that “the swimmer’s solitary training, the long hours spent semi-submerged, induce a lonely, meditative state of mind. Much of a swimmer’s training takes place inside his head, immersed as he is in a continuous dream of a world under water. So intense and concentrated are his conditions that he becomes prey to delusions and neuroses beyond the experience of other athletes.”

I don't know that I would agree with swimmers being delusional. That swimming is solitary and rhythmic tends to put the swimmer in a reflective frame of mind where the water can comb out the concerns and anxieties of ordinary life, and possibly there are times that shutting out anxieties could be called delusional. But certainly the sense of distance you feel underwater confers a kind of comfort.

Still, whether it was Sprawson's discouraging diagnosis or simply the impulse to test my own assumptions, I was assailed from time to time with the notion of swimming as a communal, possibly even social, activity. Certainly swimming and eroticism are natural colleagues. I can think of no other sport that is so innately sensual. It is not only in the way the water caresses your skin but also in the way it is all about reaching as far as you can. Swimming is about touching the surface of the water and drawing yourself across it, it is about remove and submersion and sometimes it is also about submitting to the strength and current and direction of the water.

Even Sprawson, once he has established the idea that the swimmer is a lonely neurotic, doesn't hesitate to note that swimming is also an enterprise that can establish a romantic bond and has been catalogued doing exactly that exhaustively by writers through the ages. For Lord Byron, water was just another venue in which to pursue his famous liaisons; lame from birth, it was only in the water that Byron felt complete physical freedom and in swimming that he cultivated emotional attachments to men and women alike. To be Lord Byron's swimming partner was almost certainly to be his lover. From [F. Scott Fitzgerald's](#) Dick Diver to [Tennessee Williams's](#) Sebastian, the history of literature is full of swimmers who, for all their delusions and lonely neuroses, find in water the catalyst for erotic attachments.

If you accept the idea that swimming can cultivate an erotic bond, surely it can establish other ties as well. And just as a river can take you from one place to another, so too can it deliver you to a sense of purpose. In September 2002, Martin Strel, a 47-year-old music teacher from Slovenia, took on the entire length of the Mississippi River. That was the 10th anniversary of the diplomatic ties between the United States and the recognition of an independent Republic of Slovenia, and it was Strel's intention to swim 11 hours a day, day after day, until he had swum the entire 2,320-mile course of the river to further the alliance between the two countries and to promote "peace, friendship, and clean water." And Christopher Swain, a swimmer from Burlington, Vt., has made it his mission to swim American rivers to raise environmental awareness. He has swum the entire length of the Columbia River (1,243 miles), the Hudson River (315 miles), the length of Lake Champlain (125 miles) and the Charles River (80 miles).

If you are a swimmer, then, and one equipped with a sense of purpose, a river may be what you want; its flow can support single-mindedness and reconfirm conviction and determination. Such, at least, was the theory I had a chance to test when I learned of the first Great Newburgh to Beacon Hudson River Swim, about 70 miles north of New York City, in 2004. Organized by the nonprofit group River Pool at Beacon, the swim was a fund-raiser for the construction of a river pool. With a permeable floor and sides, the pool

allows river water to flow through it and invites people to wade and swim in the river without the fear of tides, currents or intrusive vegetation. The pool celebrates the fact that, some 35 years after the passage of the Clean Water Act, the river is clean enough to swim in again; not only will it bring people back to the river but it will also nurture a sense of stewardship. Registering for the swim, I found that it became possible to imagine that the wide waters of the Hudson might confer a broader understanding of communality.

Which is how I came to find myself on a windy September afternoon on a pier in Newburgh, directly across the river from Beacon, with 62 other swimmers. Some 35 kayakers were working as spotters, an auxiliary Coast Guard escort was on hand and river traffic had been stopped for the duration of the swim. Slack current was around 2 o'clock that afternoon, so the one-mile swim to Beacon had been planned for 1:30. Who knew how long it would take. One organizer explained as we prepared to dive into the river: "We'll start with the slow swimmers. The medium-speed swimmers can go in next, then the fastest swimmers. That way, everyone will reach the other side at almost the same time."

While such enforcement tactics for making things equal on this earth rarely work out as planned, something else that brings out the best in people was at work that day. There was, for example, the reluctance among swimmers to rate themselves by ability; it seemed tacitly understood that identifying yourself as a fast or slow swimmer directly contradicted the egalitarian spirit of the afternoon. While one swimmer in a wet suit and a pair of high-tech chartreuse goggles admitted to being a fast swimmer, I noticed he was also eager to be in the water, and rather than wait to go in last, he dove in somewhere in the middle of the crowd. Another swimmer reluctantly admitted to being fast, then added quietly, "But today, I think I'd rather do it slowly." And those who felt they might be the slower swimmers seemed disinclined to go to the head of the line and jump in the water first, as if the knowledge that they were sure to finish last necessitated that they jump in last as well. From the outset, it was clear that this was not a race but something simpler, a late-summer swim in the river.

Besides, who among us, when confronted unexpectedly and directly, knows best how to identify his or her own skills and talents? Who was fast and who was slow? Possibly, this manner of self-evaluation can be taken seriously in a therapist's office or in some corporate human resources department, but for those of us standing on a pier in Newburgh, on the verge of swimming across the Hudson River, any semblance of the assured self-regard we might possess in other life pursuits had vanished with the wind and the current. That self-knowledge, an inexact science to begin with, can come and go so fleetingly seemed strangely comforting. In the face of nature, the sweep of the long, gray river and the cut of mountains above it, it made sense that what we seemed to be so certain of in ourselves was suddenly evanescent. In the end, we just jumped into the river in random groups of four or five.

The river was choppy that afternoon. Visibility was low. The natural turbidity, a product of aquatic life, made it difficult to see anything underwater, and when I lifted my head

out, the waves and whitecaps obscured the view of the shoreline as well. If this river were a book, it would be dense, obscure, difficult to read. Some rivers have a brilliant clarity; they are translucent, quick, clear about themselves and where they are going and where they are taking you. Others, like the Hudson, have a thickness and opacity, as if there were too much type on the page to take it all in. The pages are long and packed with intricate information, and even at the end of the page, you may not be quite sure of what you've read. Its narrative begins as a lake on the side of Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks, and the clear mountain stream running from it ends up as a tidal channel in the Atlantic Ocean. Its character, never fixed, is transformed during its passage from freshwater to saline, from a thin, winding stream to a broad, straight channel. It has a tide and a current, and it flows both ways; sometimes it flows both ways at once.

Native Americans once called the river Muhheakantuck, which can be translated as "river that flows both ways," and indeed, the Hudson River is paradox made manifest in the natural world. Because the bottom of the river, from its mouth to the Troy Dam some 150 miles north, is below sea level, the tidal force of the ocean causes the river to rise and fall; the river, in fact, is one continuous wave, which explains why the tide rises and falls at such different times at different points along the river. Even the word "river" may be too limited; while fresh water from rain and snowfall identifies it as a river, the Hudson is also an estuary. It is a curious sight on a winter's day to watch the ice floes on the river surge to the north, back toward the river's source rather than south toward the Atlantic Ocean; there is something mesmerizing about watching an event in the natural world unfold with such a contrary rhythm. Stranger still is watching the ice floes in the center of the river flow one way while those on the edges flow in the opposite direction. Such spectacles seem to challenge every notion we have about the natural order of things, powerful evidence that our ideas of innate order are not always to be trusted.

Maybe it was the river's proximity to the ocean, the fact that it is tidal and carries the sweet taste of distant seawater, or maybe it was just the thrill of finally being in the water, but a sense of natural buoyancy seemed to carry us across the swells and through the whitecaps and their confetti of spray. And if those made it difficult to gauge distance and direction without stopping and pausing to regain bearings, if those slowed the rhythm of the swim, that wasn't altogether a bad thing. Constantly stopping was also a way of taking measure of how far we had come and how far we had yet to go. Trying to judge distance across water is an improbable exercise. I didn't know whether I had swum a quarter mile or a third or was even coming close to a half. And despite the fact that we were swimming at slack current, there was a slight tug of current upstream that seemed to obscure further whatever sense of distance and direction I was hanging on to. It was the rhythm of my breathing that became a measure, though one fugitive and vanishing. I knew that sometimes swimmers kept an exact count of every stroke in a meditative exercise much like the Zen Buddhist practice of *kinhin*, a moving contemplation in which you walk clockwise around a room, timing each step with each breath. While such discipline has always seemed extreme to me, I understood then that there was something universal about the desire to calculate experience by attending to its smallest increments.

From the height of the Newburgh-Beacon bridge just to the north of our route across the river, the Hudson appears endless, so wide with possibility, that you could forgive Henry Hudson for once believing it the route to China. It is a view that speaks not only to the continuum of flowing water and the distance it has traveled but also to the continuum of time; and when confronted with these from the middle of that bridge, it is easy to believe that both of them are limitless. And from the top of Beacon Mountain on its eastern bank, this stretch of the river is even more grand. Andrew Jackson Downing, one of America's pre-eminent landscape designers of the 19th century, hiked the Hudson Highlands as a boy, and of the view from the summit of the mountain he wrote: "The Hudson — the prince of rivers! It appears to you that you see it rising like a silvery rivulet, 30 miles north of you in those distant hills, gradually widening, meandering, spreading life and freshness around, until here it loses itself, a deep, broad, powerful torrent in the rent chasm of the Highlands."

His description remains accurate. The rocky summit of Beacon Mountain marks a point of transition in the topography of the Hudson Valley, and the route of our swim also marked a place where the character of the river changes decisively. To the north, the reach of the river is a shimmering corridor that winds quietly through the rolling hills of the valley up through Dutchess, Ulster and Columbia Counties. Downriver, though, the river cuts a more prominent path through the Appalachian ridge; glaciers carving their way through to the sea during the ice age sliced a passage through the granite. Here the river meets the definition of a fjord; mountains of granite and limestone drop sharply into the narrow and deep channel. A view of that Hudson conjures both startling geologic cataclysm along with a sense of great repose; oddly, the image of water cutting through rock evokes a sense of stillness.

But the view midriver, from within the opaque, gray waves, was different yet. Although we had jumped into the river together, we scattered quickly. The wind, the current and our varying senses of direction all worked to separate us, and each swimmer seemed suddenly solitary. From the little whitecap I was caught up in, the sense of time and water stretching endlessly on either side was replaced by a perspective of immediacy and the certainty of being confined in a small space. Perhaps it is a human impulse to construct borders and margins for ourselves when the world around us seems too spacious; maybe it is only natural to devise a small, intimate space when nature seems so boundless. Here it was a random and improvisational arrangement, a fluid little room defined by whitecaps in the middle of the river that answered to a desire to feel close and contained.

Maybe it is simply because the body is about 70 percent water, but swimming in a river confers a sense of intimacy with the natural world that isn't easy to come by. And if you feel you own a little piece of this river, there is also something in the way the real estate of the water slips through your hands that persuades you that the river owns a bit of you as well. It is a fluid exchange. Intimacy with the river, like other kinds of intimacy, is laced with ambiguity, with questions of ownership elusive and variable. And it becomes an easy thing to imagine yourself a particle in the river's continuity, so easy, in fact, that you begin to see things the way the river might see them. And you see, then, how that continuity can be reassuring. You somehow go through life to a certain point always

thinking that even if you can't exactly start over, at least you can fix things or change them and that all the missteps and wrong directions can be corrected and that it is never too late. Later you may find yourself believing that is no longer true. I looked up the river and down it. Its flow was certain, its direction unchangeable, but still it could take on the day's nuances of light, the vagaries of the shifting tide.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a professor and former chairman of the psychology department at the [University of Chicago](#), is the creator of flow theory, which proposes that human experience is fullest when action and awareness converge, whether through play, sport, ritual, pageantry or anything else. In "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience," he writes that "flow helps to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration, consciousness is unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings and all the senses are focused on the same goal. Experience is in harmony." I don't know that the human mind is capable of reordering itself in such a way very often or very easily, but in my own experience, if it is to happen at all, it is likely to be in a river. Possibly this is what Sprawson's lonely and delusional swimmer is after. And possibly it's what my kids mean when they say, "Just get over yourself." It doesn't always take a river to get over yourself, but I see now that it's a good place to start.

Despite being separated by the whitecaps, by the current and each by his or her own often deviant sense of direction, a feeling of community prevailed. That happened especially with parents who were swimming with their kids; not surprisingly, the notion of swimming across a wide river can tap into a parent's most primal fears. At one point midriver, I found myself listening to the strains of show tunes. Mary Koniz Arnold and her 13-year-old daughter were singing to keep themselves motivated. "My daughter was born a mermaid," Arnold told me later. Arnold is classically trained and sings professionally, and although I had not expected to encounter magical realism that day on the Hudson, the songs from "The King and I" and "My Fair Lady" echoing across the river did not seem out of place. The premise of musical theater is that when the spoken word is insufficient expression, you break into song, and certainly such an impulse of exultation was understandable that afternoon. Besides, such tunes as "Shall We Dance?" and "I Could Have Danced All Night" suggested the image of the riverbed as a dance floor, which wasn't much of a stretch; certainly there was a sense of ceremony, and if dance is sometimes a way of finding a new movement, a new step, crossing new ground, the swim qualified as all of those. Moreover, the waltz, the foxtrot and the Charleston and the breast stroke, the butterfly and the crawl all are a system of ordering human movement with both grace and efficiency; all of them a repetition of rhythmic gestures that are at once precise and fluid. Arnold herself put it more simply. Explaining her notion of swimming as a social experience, she later told me, "I guess I always took to heart the admonition 'Always swim with a buddy.'"

As we passed the halfway point across the river, traffic on the western side was gradually allowed to resume. A barge that had paused upriver now picked up speed, and its wake sent another sequence of choppy waves in our direction, and that, along with the suddenly strengthening tide, gave the river a new force. The tide was now coming in earlier than expected, creating a strong upriver current, and swimming the last several hundred feet

downstream to the Beacon marina suddenly became labored. Established river lore has it that because of the ever-alternating directions of tide and current, a stick thrown into the Hudson at Troy will not reach New York City for a year and a half. I can't speak to the accuracy of this, yet the beginning pull of the tide made it seem possible; this is a river that can pull you every which way.

The old farmhouse I grew up in in the Hudson Valley not far from here came with a meadow, woods, three apple trees and a meandering stream. And like kids everywhere, I was most drawn to the water. The stream provided endless ways to play — you could wade, build forts and little boats, divert the water into small pools or dam it up completely. But what gave the stream its greatest allure was that it was different every day. The contours of its gravel bed were ever shifting. Its water might be high or low, a rock might have toppled into it, or after a heavy storm, a tree across it. In October, it might be clogged with leaves, and in winter whatever happened took place under its thin scrim of surface ice. Animals — raccoons, squirrels, foxes — came and went. Water changes whatever is around it, and at the same time, it reflects everything that happens around it.

Not long ago, I was having lunch with a friend at a New York City restaurant, talking to her about the changing character of American rivers, and when she quoted the Greek philosopher Heraclitus — You could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you — I found myself thinking not so much about all the rivers that have so preoccupied my life in recent years but of that thin stream of water of my childhood and how it was a different place every day.

Since that first group swim in the Hudson, I've done it every summer, and every summer it is a different river. In August 2005, tides mandated that we swim as the sun came up over Beacon Mountain. While swimming into the sunrise is an exercise that is poor for visibility, it is good for some other part of you. Particles of sunlight were refracted and reflected across the surface of the water until even the current itself seemed suffused with gold. That morning, I found myself following a turquoise sloop with burgundy sails; it was a reasonable goal, close enough but still sliding through the water just ahead. Last summer, we swam on a sunny morning at the end of July, and there was something in the stillness of the day and calm of the current that made it seem deceptively placid. And while I can't predict how the constellation of sky and water and wind and light will be aligned when we swim this year on Aug. 5, I know the river will be a different place still.

What I recall most about the September swim three years ago was how something in the strength of the river that afternoon was oddly reassuring. Ordinarily, the sensation of being overwhelmed or overpowered is likely to come during some kind of hardship, the death or loss of someone you love or a catastrophic natural disaster, and it is possible to imagine that your identity has been consumed by external forces and that your spirit is in havoc. I remember swimming once with my son, Luc, then about 10, in the Atlantic Ocean off Fire Island. We had swum out past the surf and were bobbing in the waves, drifting toward danger without knowing it. Minutes later, watching the shoreline recede, I realized that we were caught in a riptide. Holding on to him with one hand, I waved

frantically to our friends on the shore, but they only waved back, thinking we were simply exulting in our afternoon swim; how strange that our gestures for terror and joy should be so similar. Near panic then, I grabbed his hand tighter and paddled with the other hand until we caught a wave that returned us to shore.

Swimming in the river that afternoon was some sibling sensation of that experience, but if the flow of the river was overpowering, the loss of identity was sustaining. Swimming in a river — rather than a pond, pool or lake — answers to the part of you that wants to be swept away. Maybe that's why it's a way to right yourself. Maybe this is the lesson that arrived in the current of the Delaware River, that ran down the Connecticut, that flowed through the Susquehanna as well and that now was reflected in the Hudson. "When I was home I'd dreamed of the river, but on the river I dreamed of home," wrote William Least Heat-Moon in *River-Horse*, a narrative of his cross-country river trip, and it is a sentiment familiar to me; those two parts of my life lean on each other. And if from time to time I step off and away from that scaffolding of family and profession that I have attached my life to, getting lost in the stream of a river seems a safe bet; you can't leave your footprints on a river. Besides, it's a more reasonable choice than other more conventional modes of stepping outside the framework. In that way the natural world has of so often reaching us in some unpredictable and astonishing way, all of these rivers have conferred a kind of fluid axis that sets me right every time.

Akiko Busch is the author of "Geography of Home" and lives in the Hudson Valley. This essay is adapted from "Nine Ways to Cross a River: Midstream Reflections on Swimming and Getting There From Here," to be published this month by Bloomsbury USA.