

# LIVING WATERS

WRITTEN BY IMELDA WISTEY

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The still, calm pool appears as a solid surface of frozen glass. Unmoving and undisturbed, all one can hear is the hum of the plumbing system working continuously. The atmosphere is quiet, not ready to be troubled so early in the morning. Then, suddenly, a swimmer dives into the water, and breaks the placid surface. Shortly, other tired bodies follow as we silently start our morning workout, drowning out the plumbing system with the constant movement of water. The splash of hands and feet hit the now fragmented surface, and it has a calming effect on the listener. The peacefulness that had disappeared momentarily has come back again, but this time, in the form of the meditative rhythm of competitive swimmers.

This is the water that I'm used to. The chlorine that permeates the pool deck and into the locker room, can stay on my skin for hours. I endure the red eyes and dry skin when I do my daily morning and evening workouts because this is my athletic medium. Track and field athletes use the earth as their competitive medium to run; I use the water to release my competitive nature. I submerge myself in this medium every day, not only for the aerobic exercise needed for endurance, but also, to perfect the tiniest details of my stroke, lap after lap. Every hundredth of a second of every race is crucial. It is the refinement of the stroke that shaves fractions of a second. The clock is my fiercest competitor, never stopping for me to catch my breath.

I never think of the competitive pool as a wet environment. After a while, I do not feel the water soaking into my tired body. I cannot feel the sweat dripping down my face even though it is evident with the increased pounding of my heartbeat. When the days get rough, all I can think of is waiting for the pain to end while forcing myself to be my own cheerleader. Come on you can do this! It will be over before you know it.

The eyes of my coaches peer down at me like inquisitive birds while hollering out lap splits to make sure I am on pace. You've got to go faster, come on! After two hours, the pain is over. Out of the pool and onto the deck, shivering bodies barely covered in tiny practice suits scramble up to grab a warm shower. Racing in practice was enough for me, so I take my time and breathe in the satisfaction of completing a hard workout. I want to walk out of the pool knowing that I gave it

everything I had. Nothing less will be accepted. The warm shower I waited patiently for is even a reward in itself.

The pool can seem dead. The only life, the hardworking bodies of swimmers trying to outswim the person in the lane next to them. This is a routine that becomes habitual, with me thinking only of the next hard practice. By swimming in chlorine for hours every day, I see swimming as work. The pool is not a playground anymore that I can splash around in. As a child I would spend the day at the pool making up my own games complete with my own rules. I would try to hold my breath longer than my sister, or cheat with goggles when playing Marco Polo. I would even untie my hair to pretend I was a mermaid, and squirm along the tiled bottom imagining I had a fin. But the imagination is gone. I'm not even close to being a mermaid.

Because of my athletic swimming routine, I became inured to think that all water is the same, dead and nonexistent. After the initial plunge into a strenuous workout, the "wetness" of water disappears, and leaves only a fatigued body in its wake. A training trip to Florida revealed how very wrong I was.

The first time I visited an ocean was when I was seven. My mom took my sister and I to her home in the Philippines. I vaguely remember dipping my toes in the salty water of the Pacific as I listened to the conch shells that populated the beach. My sister followed my lead, but was unaware of a bright red claw inching out of the shell to latch on to the person invading its peace. My mom screamed at her before the claw could do any damage. Laughing, I stood knee deep in the water, cupping my hands to witness tiny minnows swimming in circles. I wanted to keep them forever, but the water leaked out of my hands, so I felt guilty and returned them home. After the trip, my mom said that if I learned how to swim, she would take me to swim with the dolphins. It sounded like a good idea.

After struggling through a grueling morning practice in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, I was ready to allow my body to recuperate in the exfoliating sand. Our hotel was right on the beach, so I was keen to experience an aspect of nature that eluded me since I was seven. Walking around the bend, I heard the cry of seagulls and the crashing of waves upon rocks, sculpted ever so gently. The sea breeze billowed in the distance, and I felt blessed to behold the gorgeous view of crimson hues enveloping the sun, dipping into the horizon before me.

Gazing at the pristine waters, my next instinct was to immerse myself in its beauty. This was definitely not the man-made construction I'd become accustomed to. This beauty was real and alive. The waves seemed to move, free of limits, animated by a force deep within their being known only to themselves. The rays of sunlight danced on the shimmering surface, like shards of a broken mirror reflecting light in a way that seemed to throw itself back into the sky. The ocean did not care what I thought of it. The ocean was just living, living in the way it chose to live.

I ran into the roaring waves, anxious to feel the salty waters that I once knew as a child. I let the water run over my feet and caress my toes, leaving icy kisses as it receded. I screamed like a little kid when a puppy licks her face. With a slight push of a steady hand, the waves ushered me in. Delving deeper, I let the water reach my hips and then my shoulders. I looked at the strip of land that I had escaped and pondered if I should ever go back. Treading furiously, I let the animate waves carry me up and down with a pulsating rhythm as the ocean conducted its own symphony of exact musical tempo. For the first time, I had no control of my swimming. It was the waves that commanded me where to go. The ocean took on a life of its own with an intelligence that I could not even fathom.

Here, in this living water, I was able to put aside my intensity for competing, and release the child inside of me, ecstatic to swim with glee again. I took out my hair-tie and let my long locks pour into the sea foam suspending reality for two seconds, and believed once again, that I could be a mermaid. I ran and I laughed and I splashed around, swimming with my head above the water so the salt wouldn't sting my eyes. Like a pinch to wake me from dreaming, the salty taste of the ocean kept reminding me where I was. The heartbeat bursting inside of me was not anymore because of a strenuous workout; my heartbeat now pounded with the excitement and anticipation of the living waves taking me further out to sea. For the first time, I could swim without the clock telling me how slow I was and how much faster I would have to go. I could swim without the forces of lane lines, cutting the waves down so I could move faster through the water. Efficient swimming equals fast swimming; but now, I could swim with the joy of just swimming. No more worries about winning or losing. I could simply just be. The living ocean allowed the pressures of my life in the competitive pool to fade away as I floated, watching the remnants of the warm, glowing sun, illuminated the cloudless sky as it sank dramatically into the sea.

Back at school, I was upset about returning to a contained, unnatural, pool environment. Before practice, I saw the lifeless water stretched out at 25 yards before me. I expected to feel that dread which often is a precursor to my regular practice. The constant swimming back and forth, stroke after stroke, can cause one's mind to drift off, unfocused and unclear. I dove in, waiting for the dread to sink in. But it didn't. Instead, when I moved with every stroke, I felt the water roll over me, reminiscent of the ocean waves coming over to pick me up and carry me weightless to the ever shining sun. The rush of the water in my ears, the breath of valuable air, the wet taste on my tongue – I was where I belonged. It was like the sensation of the music conducted by the ocean waves except now I was the one in perfect control. I was the one conducting my own symphony.

While taking a break at the pool wall, I smiled. This water, my water, could now be brought to life. I could give it that life. I could bring the vitality back into the dullness of my usual workouts. I could give this constructed water the same thrill that the ocean waves gave to me when I shared in its music. Every breath I took to replenish my lungs was the ebb and flow of the tide whispering to be worry-free. The memory of the crashing of waves on the shore was the starting horn signaling me to dive into the pool and leave behind white bubbles of foam. Flowing with rhythm, becoming one with my stroke, my muscles rippling with every movement, I was slashing limits to what I thought my body could do. Striving for excellence would now mean pushing my self-limiting boundaries even further, past the point of giving in, past the point to where the sky touches the sea, where there is no end.

I swim everyday so I won't lose the feeling of the water cupped against the paddle of my hands as I work towards perfection. My body becomes the instrument, the water my stage. Before the curtain falls, I see myself race to times I never dreamed of going, looking at the scoreboard, giving it a second look to be sure it really is my name next to the time. To feel the hunk of metal around my neck while standing on top of the podium is worth every taxing moment I spend at practice in the pool. And maybe, after all the years of competitive swimming, I may one day get to swim with dolphins.

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