



Deeper Waters

Swim to God in Deeper Waters

“Deeper Waters” column for September, 2007

By Julie McCarty

How grown-up I felt, at age six, standing in the shallows of the lake for my first swimming lessons! After all, I had ridden the school bus on completely different roads, all by myself. I was carrying a new, brightly colored beach bag my mother had sewn with love. Instead of school clothes, I was wearing swimsuits and novel summer outfits.

In our little cordoned off section of the lake, surrounded by what seemed like hundreds of other children from rural upstate NY, our little group listened first to water safety rules. Then we stood waist deep in the lake, practicing holding our breath while placing our faces in the water.

In future days, we learned how to glide in the water, our arms outstretched before us, face down. We experimented with floating on our backs with the teacher supporting and guiding us. One day, we even were allowed to swim *under* the rope that formed our wall from other groups.

Towards the end of the week, I convinced my mother to give me a dime and a nickel so I could buy an ice cream treat, my first unsupervised purchase. Yes, those swimming lessons were a great adventure for someone who hadn't even begun first grade.

Yet, when the lessons were over, I felt this vague sense of disappointment. I thought I was going to learn to swim. How come we never got to move our arms in the water, like the swimmers on TV?

As adults, we know human growth happens gradually. Learning to ride a bike, play soccer, or solve an Algebra equation involves learning step by step. One does not become a highly skilled doctor, teacher, priest, or CEO overnight. We learn basic skills, practice them, acquire new skills, and practice some more. Eventually we get the hang of things, sometimes even in such a way that something we do feels “natural” to us—or at least looks that way to others.

Over the centuries, teachers and writers have attempted to describe the process of spiritual growth in many different ways. A long list of these various approaches appears in the entry “Journey” in “The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality” (Liturgical Press, 1993). For example, ancient theologian Irenaeus commented that humans “must pass from a beginning and through a middle course, a growth, and progression.” St. Gregory of Nyssa found inspiration in St. Paul’s description of “straining forward to what lies ahead,” the prize promised by God (see Phil. 3:12-16). St. Benedict wrote of twelve degrees of humility.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux pondered the Christian journey in terms of “four degrees of love.” His friend, William of St. Thierry, looked at spiritual growth in three phases he called animal, rational, and spiritual. In *The Interior Castle*, St. Teresa of Avila explored “seven

mansions,” a kind of inner journey toward union with God, who dwells in the innermost chamber of the soul.

More than a decade ago, I heard a homily I will never forget because the imagery was so vivid. The priest said that so many of us “stand in the shallows” when God is inviting us to swim into deeper waters. Oh, sure, we go to church, work hard, and pay our taxes, but we are afraid to take the risk to follow Jesus more fully. We remain standing ankle deep in the water.

No matter how “spiritual” we may think ourselves, no matter how highly evolved, there is always more to come. God, the loving parent, stands at the deep end of the pool, arms outstretched, inviting us to swim to him. In upcoming months, this column called “Deeper Waters” will explore various ways we can grow in the virtues, learn more about our faith, participate more fully in prayer, and develop greater solidarity, empathy, and compassion for others. In short I hope to challenge all of us—including myself—to that ongoing conversion process that leads us into yet deeper waters of our baptism, swimming into greater communion with the Living God.

Reflection questions

--Is there some area of my life that needs attention, one way in which God wants me to grow?

--What is one step I can take this week towards improving in that area?



About the columnist:

Julie McCarty is a syndicated columnist with a master’s degree in theology and spiritual direction training. She is the author of *The Pearl of Great Price: Gospel Wisdom for Christian Marriage* (Liturgical Press, 2007). Visit her at www.juliemccarty.com.

