

GUEST ESSAY

I Am Not 80 Yet, but Among These 80-Year-Olds Is Where I Like to Be

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At my community pool, the locker room is a tableau on aging.

Throughout the day, you’ll find bodies and bottoms of every type on display, ranging from squishy baby to saggy lady. But this is not the kind of place where short-lived resolutions to lose 15 pounds get made or broken. Here, the arc of fitness is long, and it bends toward seniors.

The hour when I frequent the pool for my lap swim has long coincided with the 8 a.m. aqua aerobics class, taught by Kathe, a calm, convivial woman with honey-colored hair and a beatific smile. Many of her devotees are in their 80s. Some are there for physical therapy after an injury; others are contending with the incessant aches and pains of age. In that crowded warren of benches and communal showers, where every flick of a towel or reach of an arm brings you into someone else’s personal space, ordinary civilities carry larger import.

I am not 80. But among these 80-year-olds is where I like to be.

I first came to this pool after my second child was born and my family moved across the bay from San Francisco to Berkeley. This is where I reclaimed my body, a little softer and a lot more tired, as my own. Day after day in the outdoor pool, I pulled and kicked my way back into the swimming habits that made me feel like, well, me.

Almost a decade later now, my passage through many a day is eased by the morning transit through this locker room, in the company of these women. The daily celebration of bodies that are happy and working makes me comfortable and ever grateful in mine.

Here is where we warm up from the swim in the open showers; here is where we jockey for space in the cramped dressing area, all of us in various stages of nakedness — this one applying moisturizer, that one in underwear, still another wrestling with a stubborn pair of leggings. We contort our bodies in the most unattractive ways. It’s where we can show vulnerability, in all its forms.

Loneliness, we know, leads to deteriorating health. I listen to the way the people in this room rally around one another, through struggles that range from family discord and sleeping woes to cancer and chemo and the death of dear ones. Sometimes I swim with a buddy or train with the masters team. Often I come alone. But always I find company in the locker room — a conversation to dip into or just to listen to. And always there is the comforting routine of simply discussing the water conditions in the pool that day or admiring the pattern on someone else’s bathing suit.

Sometimes the struggles are mine, and sometimes they are the struggles of someone twice my age. I remember the day I was reduced to tears by the wildly swinging hormonal pendulums of breastfeeding and sleep deprivation. I remember missing my mother, who lives across the country in New York. That day, a woman told me that she was anxious about visiting her very pregnant daughter and how she wasn't sure how long her daughter wanted her around after the baby was born.

"Go," I told her firmly. "You can always ask her when she wants you to leave."

Certainly, there are maternal and grandmaternal surrogates to be found here. Once, as we were getting dressed, I confessed to a friend that I didn't know how to buy underwear anymore, because all of it comes from my mother, who can eyeball the ideal fit of a bikini brief for me from a mile away and who refreshes my collection of undergarments every year, in my Christmas stocking, without fail. I told my friend that my husband had expressed his incredulity to me in this way: "You're 40 years old, and your mom still buys your underwear?"

But I remember another woman, perhaps a decade older than we were, who listened to the story and started to cry.

"That is the sweetest thing I ever heard," she said, wiping her eyes. "Tell your mom I said so." And I did.

I adore the cross-section of ages and bodies in this locker room, but I like to observe the ecosystems of other locker rooms, too. Not every locker room has the range of age and swimming ability that I now know to look for. There are plenty of sports clubs that attract impossibly fit Ironman triathletes and squash pros and disciples of the latest HIIT/cycling/barre/boot camp workout craze.

But there's something vitally different about seeing older bodies as a younger person. As a society, we tend to fear the old and the aging and silo them away. We don't often see our older relatives, much less see them naked. But there is an important kind of bond, a mutual acceptance and acknowledgment, that comes from having bared your flesh together.

I remember vividly a morning when Alicia showed Patricia her longtime stretching routine by getting right down on top of her towel on the clammy tiled floor.

"I have been stretching all my life. I have scoliosis," Alicia declared, mid-hip stretch. "If I didn't do it, I'd be in a wheelchair now."

Lovely Patricia with her British accent chirped anxiously above her: "I'm glad you're not! But I think you'd better get up now, dear, or you'll get run over."

These days we linger a little less, but the usual suspects are there. Kathe still dispenses nuggets about everything from mahjong and yoga classes to the history of Title IX at U.C. Berkeley, where she was once a student. Slowly but surely as we work our way back to our routines, I see more and more of the regulars. As the ladies shuffle or saunter or sail out of the locker room, they call their farewells. When they pass me at the long mirror by the door, they smile and meet my eyes, and as they do so, I know there's a solution for most every problem in that small greeting.

"How are you?"

"I'm all right. I'm here, aren't I?"

Eighty-year-old women are full of wisecracks. Theirs is the kind of locker-room talk that teaches me to love the body I have, today. Their laughs explode like a bouquet of fireworks, with a sharp and knowing joy.

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