

Swimming Upstream

Every morning, between 7:30 and 8 a.m., I sit on the steps that lead into the San Marcos River, put on my fins and goggles, and head upstream. Returning downstream, I'm often asked how far I made it, and my answer is always this: "As far as the river and I could agree on today." And that is the truth, because each day my swim is a negotiation between my body and the ever-changing current of the river. What started out as a pure curiosity to see what was around the bend upstream has spun into a rich and rewarding daily ritual.

I was born an Aquarian, and my earliest joyful memories as a child are those of wading in creeks. Weekends in the Bay Area always involved a trip to the beach. Then, in my adolescence, when we moved to the Sacramento Valley, I swam on swim teams, river rafted and worked summers as swim instructor and lifeguard through college. Wild swimming, however, was never really my thing. Mostly because wild swimming also included other wild things that I wasn't so sure I wanted to share my swim experience with. But something changed when I reached my 50s, and I started challenging a variety of limiting behaviors I had adopted over a lifetime. Today I am so grateful I broke through all my fears regarding open-water swims. I can't imagine missing out on my morning interactions with the San Marcos River.

Here are some lessons that my swims upstream have taught me. These lessons have become equally useful in and out of the water:

The current is constantly changing, and so is my body.

Navigating is more about technique than strength. Swimming smarter is more useful than swimming harder.

A new angle of approach on a challenging stretch can get me to the other side of it.

Pausing to reassess may be all that is needed.

Let go of any expectations to reach a certain destination. Swim for the experience, enjoying all the lessons along the way.

Interactions with nature hold so many metaphors for life, whether you sit in the garden observing insects on the ground, stand under the night sky, take a hike among the trees or swim like I do. Connecting with nature on a regular basis keeps us in check. It keeps us on an authentic path. Everything I encounter on my swim is real. There is nothing contrived about it. Yet the moment I leave it, I encounter a world so vastly different. Carrying the lessons learned into my day is a simple yet profound way of remembering what is really important and focusing my energy there.

Is there a ritual in nature you have found to connect with your authentic self? Is there one you would like to create? Keep it simple so it fits your life today, and as your life changes, you can make room for more. What small step can you say yes to? Pay attention to the lessons that nature shares so generously.