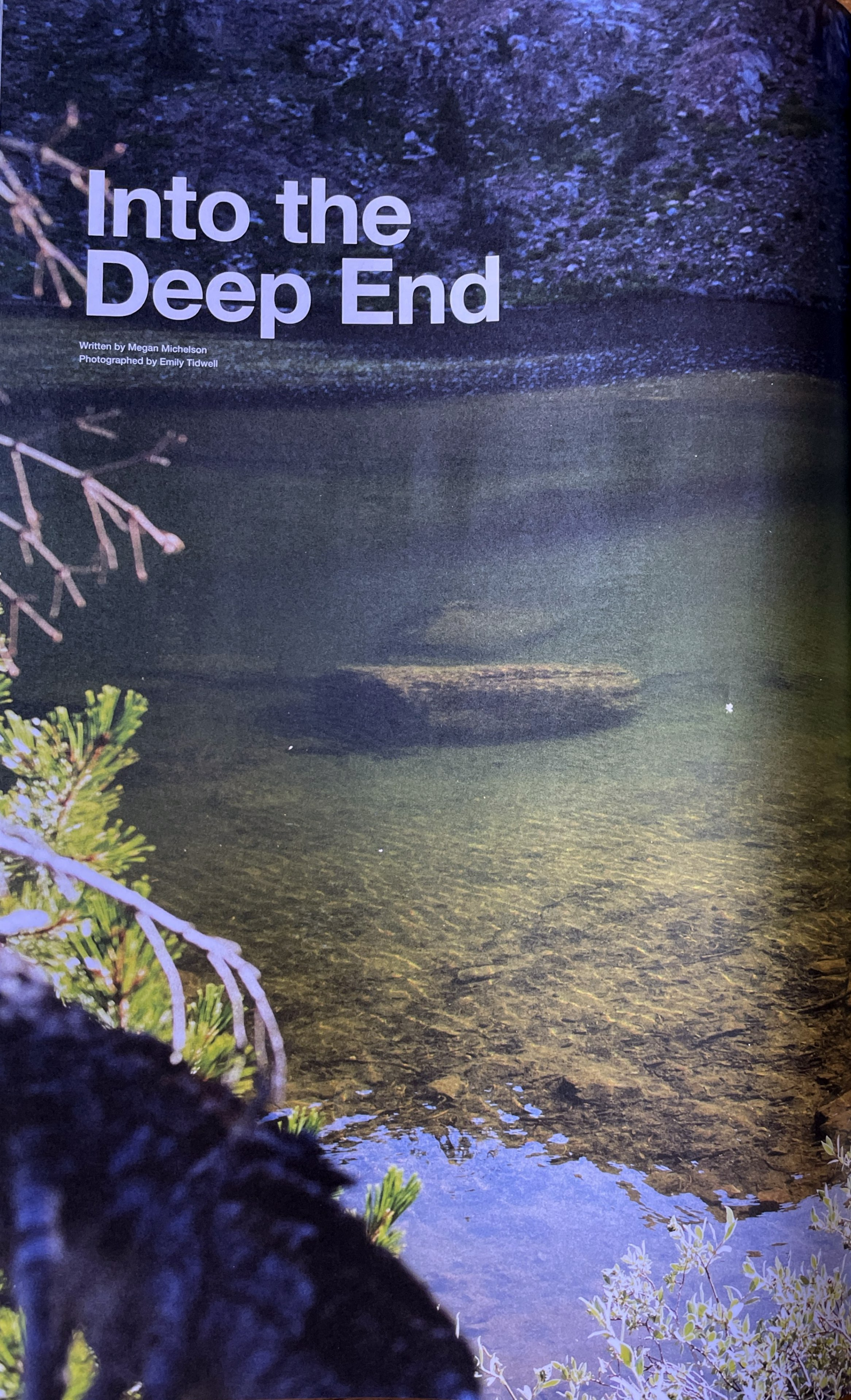


Into the Deep End

Written by Megan Michelson
Photographed by Emily Tidwell



Let's start with this honest truth: Swimming while naked feels downright glorious. The lustrous water silky against your bare skin. Nothing between you and nature's finest liquid. When you step out of the lake, or the river, or the ocean, there's no damp, constricting fabric clinging to you. It's just your flesh, drying quickly and effortlessly in the beaming sun. The whole experience feels like freedom, innocence, and beauty, wrapped into one juicy plunge.

Now that we've established the wondrous part of skinny-dipping, let's not forget the rest of it. The awkwardness. The embarrassment. The accidental flashing of body parts. I had run 14 miles on the Pacific Crest Trail with a male friend to reach the shores of Middle Velma Lake, smack in California's Desolation Wilderness along Lake Tahoe's west shore. Me: dirty, sweaty, tired. The lake: cool, refreshing, inviting. But I didn't have a swimsuit and I still had miles to run, so I didn't want to deal with a wet sports bra.

I told David I was going to find my own private spot to jump in, out of eyesight. He did the same. Except my zone wasn't very discreet from some neighboring backpackers, so I slipped out of my running clothes in a crouched position, hiding behind a too-small rock. Then I slid clumsily into a shallow wedge of the lake, keeping my body submerged in a mere foot of water to avoid striding in like Eve herself. It was not graceful. But once I was in deeper, I submerged my head, felt the water flush along my skin, and sensed a wave of stress drain from my body.

I grew up with a nature-loving, pot-smoking single mother who, much to my embarrassment, loved swimming in the nude. When I was a kid, she and I would go to the Yuba River, a stunning waterway near where I grew up in Northern California. We'd walk downstream until we were out of view, then jump into the loveliest swimming hole we could find, me in a one-piece swimsuit, her in nothing. This is a woman who didn't own a bra for decades and encouraged experimentation of all kinds. I had a blessed childhood, no doubt, but my mom's free-spirited nature somehow made me the most prude kid on the street, perennially ultra-modest and easily embarrassed by my own skin.

In my 20s and 30s, I'd go to hot springs in the Sierra with friends and be the only one in a swimsuit. I'd change under a towel in gym locker rooms. While on hut trips in the backcountry, I'd wear a swimsuit into the sauna. I was that girl. I blame my mother entirely. It's not that I was ashamed of my body; I just felt more comfortable clothed.

But now I'm a mother myself—my kids are 6 and 8—and I'm entering my 40s, the decade my mother found her most liberal nudity. Recently, I've found myself developing an uncharacteristically laissez faire approach to clothing. I'm not saying I walk around my backyard naked, but when I'm on a hike with my kids to an alpine lake and nobody else is around, it sure is nice if I don't have to haul out

wet swimsuits. The question I've been asking myself lately is why have I been holding onto these garments—and this pressure to stay covered up—for so long?

So, this past summer, I challenged myself to give skinny-dipping a chance (when appropriate, of course). I wanted to see if it made a difference in my psyche or my connection to those around me or the natural world. I also decided to ask others who go in the nude why they do it and what it does for them. Maybe I'd find out that skinny-dipping is the answer to world peace and inner happiness.

Frog Lake is a precious alpine pool backed by a giant, imposing cliff. On a ridge above the lake sits a series of newly built backcountry huts, which require hiking 5 miles over a mountain pass to reach. It's a gorgeous spot, with very few people around. In mid-July, I hiked into the huts with my family, as well as three other families with young kids.

Our first day at the lake, I jumped in—wearing a swimsuit; it's weird that I have to qualify that—and swam across. On the other side, I scrambled out of the water and rested on a flat rock getting baked by the sun. The sun felt good, but I was chilled.

Day Two, I got up early with my daughter, Nora, and we went down to the water's edge. Her job was to scout my skinny-dip and make sure the coast was clear. I tossed my clothes onto a rock and hopped in, as liberated as a topless marcher at a Pride parade. The early-morning dunk woke me up better than Italian espresso, and I felt alive and recharged.

But in that split second as I was stepping out of the water, before I could reach my towel, one of my fellow hut dwellers rounded a corner, fishing rod in hand. My daughter shrieked in alarm. The fisherman looked over, concerned. Meanwhile, I was screeching and diving for the towel, like a naked Superman flying into home plate. That refreshed, alert feeling I'd had moments earlier was now replaced by total humiliation.

People have been skinny-dipping since the dawn of time. Back then, it was just called swimming. But the act has largely had a stigma of indecency for centuries. In 1449, a newspaper in Bath, England, reportedly wrote that "people were shamelessly stripping themselves of their swimming garments and revealing themselves to bystanders."

Still, it's been an underlying part of Western culture for generations. Benjamin Franklin, Huck Finn, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman swam in the nude. Artists like Thomas Eakins, Charles Shannon, Norman Rockwell, and David Hockney painted naked swimmers. President John Quincy Adams—who's been called the founding father of skinny-dipping—used to wake up at four in the morning and swim naked in the Potomac River for exercise during his presidency in the 1820s.

The term "skinny-dipping" was coined in the 1940s, when advances in textile manufacturing made it possible to swim in a fabric that could get wet and dry quickly. From that point on, when you swam in just your skin, it was called skinny-dipping. In 1971, when now-Sen. Patrick Leahy was a state attorney in Vermont, he was challenged on the legality of skinny-dipping.

Leahy declared that in public or semi-public areas, nude bathing is not acceptable, and perpetrators should be asked to get clothed. (I think we can all agree on that.) On private land, he determined, or out of view of the public, the state has no interest in the matter, and swimmers should be left alone. And lastly, he wrote, "In secluded areas sometimes publicly used (rivers, swimming holes, etc.): If no member of the public is offended, no disorderly conduct has taken place."

Regardless of its legality, I recognize that skinny-dipping is a privileged, and perhaps self-righteous and obnoxious, activity. I am a white, size 6, able-bodied, cis-gender woman, which is to say I've had it pretty darn easy. "What is it with white people and being carefree and naked outdoors?" writes Jolie Varela, a citizen of the Tule River Yokut and Paiute Nations and founder of Indigenous Women Hike, a community of Indigenous women focused on reconnecting with their native lands. "Maybe something having to do with white bodies being the default for what belongs in the outdoors (or just everywhere) and/or their bodies are safer to be naked outdoors."

When *Outside* magazine posted an Instagram photo of two people hiking naked, Varela responded, "All white people... Because y'all move around the world so freely that the next step is to do it naked."

I didn't want my skinny-dipping mission to step on anyone's toes. This was a matter between me and a lake far from anyone else.

A man named Fred (he asked not to have his last name included) has invited me to join him and a group of other naturists—a nice-sounding word for "nudists"—for pizza at an after-hours restaurant on Saturday night. In the nude. I cannot imagine a less appetizing food to eat naked than pizza.

Fred is a high school English teacher from Nevada and a nudist for going on 20 years. "I'd love to live in a world where clothing was the exception, but that's probably not going to happen," he says. Fred, who started a local naturists' group in his area, wrote an essay for his college English class on nudism in America. "I find it to be more relaxing swimming or sunbathing nude than with the restrictions of clothing," he wrote. "If more people would shed their clothes every once in a while, the world would become an easier place to live, less uptight and less violent." The classmate



who presented after him said, "It's going to be really hard to follow the naked people."

I tell Fred I'm definitely not up for pizza in the buffet, but swimming would be good. A few weeks later, he invites me to join his group at Secret Cove, a clothing-optional beach on the serene east shore of Lake Tahoe. Back in the day, Secret Cove was a quiet patch of sand where nude sunbathers were welcomed and everyone else stayed away.

But these days, the textiles—as nudists called clothed people—are moving in. Nearly half the beachgoers now are clothed. "If the textiles form enough complaints and we lose that beach, it'll be a sad day," Fred says.

Fred introduces me to a woman who's a part of his naturist group, a chatty, friendly lady named Susan. "When you remove your clothing, you also remove your judgment," Susan tells me over the phone. "It's about living an open life." Susan is 55, works for a payroll company, and has three kids. (One of them thinks her habit for nudism is very weird; the other two don't mind.)

When she says the word "clothing," she follows it with a low, guttural grunt: "Clothing...uggghh." Like the very thought of pants weighs her down. I'd called her to ask for some pointers: How do I swim in the nude without feeling so, um, awkward? "Have fun," she told me. "Surround yourself with good people. Or just pretend that nobody else is around."

In 2014, Susan's boyfriend invited her to a nudist resort in California. "That sounds different," she responded, but she agreed to check it out. When she got there, and started walking around without any clothes, she says it felt like coming home.

"I've had body-image issues my whole life. I've always been a heavyset girl, and I still don't like my body with clothes on," she told me. "Bathing-suit shopping was always the worst. I still buy T-shirts that are three times too big, just to hide my body. But take me to a nude beach and I just don't care."

Susan told me that when she's unclothed in the right settings, it feels like she's crossed into an alternate universe, one where people treat others with kindness and respect. "All the social pressures lift," she says. "Being outdoors, having the sun on your shoulders, you experience the environment as a whole. It enlightens your senses. It allows you to be the person you were meant to be."

For a minute, I consider joining Fred and Susan at Secret Cove. They seem welcoming and kind, and it would be a good crash course in skinny-dipping culture. But then I look up the Yelp and Tripadvisor reviews of the beach. "I would say 80% of the people were wearing swimsuits, also there were many families with kids on the beach," one person wrote. Another added, "Family oriented. Beach was packed." The third review, and final straw for me: "Great place for taking photos."

Yeah, no way. I thank Fred for the invite, but tell him I'm out. Fred wishes me well and offers this: "Don't expect to just dive into the deep end." Nude beaches may not be for me, but bodies of water that require a lengthy hike or run to reach and get me as far from others as possible—now we're talking.

In the 1980s, a guy named Michael Donnelly, who's now in his 70s and retired in Salem, Oregon, created a competition among his friends to see who could bag the most lakes in a summer. It was mostly a joke—a spoof on the idea of peak-bagging big summits—but they took it seriously enough that one summer, one of his friends swam in 68 different lakes to win the contest. "One year, I got 42, but normally I'd get 20-something lakes," Donnelly told me.

The rules of the contest were simple: You had to have full-body immersion, and you had to hike to reach the lake. "We count ponds as long as they're over your head," he says. Skinny-dipping is the preferred way to go—"Then you're not carrying around wet shorts," he says—as long as you're not disturbing anyone else.

He's still playing the game, by the way, counting his lakes. "We try to go to these hidden spots. To me, that's more of a pristine experience," Donnelly says. "It's incredibly peaceful and relaxing. You jump into the water and out of normal society."

I'm at Round Lake now, in late July with my mom, in a heavenly pocket of California known as the Sierra Buttes. The hike in took us a couple of miles, and there's no one else around. She doesn't flinch. Out of her clothes and seamlessly into the water. Now in her 70s, my mom is still a very strong swimmer, and still very comfortable in her own flesh. I follow her lead, cringing while disrobing, hiding body parts from the very woman who created them, then flop into the water like a gutless fish.

Maybe I put too much pressure on a silly naked swim. Honestly, how transformative could a lake plunge in your birthday suit really be?

Keon West, a professor of social psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London in England, spent more than a decade examining prejudice and discrimination. He says a lot of the research in that field was depressing and unpleasant, so he started looking for new topics that would be more fun and engaging. "Naturism seemed both under-researched and potentially interesting," West says. "I started taking part in many of the activities to facilitate that research and found them enjoyable."

West, who sunbathes naked in his backyard, according to Twitter, says both his personal experience and his scientific research found that participating in naturist activities can improve your body image, self-esteem, and overall life

satisfaction. In other words, being naked more often can make you happier.

He used before-and-after studies, randomized controlled trials, and cross-sectional surveys, and found that communal nudity reduces our anxiety about how other people view our bodies and gives us more normal bodies to compare ourselves to, contrasting the unrealistic images we see in the media. I ask him if I can get the same benefits from swimming in the nude if I'm by myself, far from anyone. "I'm not sure how you'd get either of those benefits if you were always alone," he responds.

So, that's how I end up texting three close girlfriends to ask if they'd be willing to skinny dip with me. "Bring a towel, no swimsuit," I write. Shockingly, they all say yes (and respond with a lot of peach emojis). On a Monday evening after work in mid-August, we meet in a parking lot and hike to a quiet, tiny lake, belted by pine trees and granite walls.

On the hike, we swap funny stories about past skinny-dipping incidents. Like the time Kerstin went to Thanksgiving with her husband's family and all of them—uncles, aunts, cousins—jumped into the river naked. Or the time Brita took an ex-boyfriend skinny-dipping in a waterfall while on a hike, and he was very uptight. Or when Lindsay went on a fully naked camping trip with friends (except for the one guy who wore clothes the entire time) and they all jumped off a bridge naked.

At the lake, we yank off sweaty T-shirts and socks (plus everything else) and jump into the water unceremoniously, like it is no big deal. Which it isn't. These three women are supportive in just the right way, which is that nobody acts like we are naked. Just friends swimming in a scenic lake. Nothing to see here.

I float on my back in the middle of the lake, staring at the clouds overhead, and realize, *Ab, this is it*. That feeling I was looking for. I had been making such a big deal out of the antics of the swim—how self-conscious I felt, how embarrassed and unnatural—that I wasn't letting myself enjoy the experience of floating and being free, of being submersed in water in the purest, most invigorating way.

On the hike down, I ask Lindsay if she feels differently after the swim, and she shrugs and says she doesn't think so. But later, she sends me a message. "I've thought more about it," she writes. "I feel energized. I came away with a sense of thrill, even exhilaration. Still now, I feel content and happy. Just excited to be in a place, having done a thing, with people I care about. Just good energy."

Maybe that's it. We seek places in the world and communities to surround ourselves with where we can be our true selves. Spaces where we can worry less and love more. I can't tell you where to find those places or how to reach that point, exactly, but I can tell you this: Jumping into the deep end feels mighty good. **MG**