

I L L U S T R A T I O N S B Y M A R I E L L A V I L L A L O B O S

Swimmers, like the rest of us, are just trying to keep their heads above water. The fact that some do it better than others sends one man back to an old piece of hippie wisdom in search of solace in the pool.

B Y D O U G H O R N E R

R E A D I N G B E T W

I t's lunchtime and the pool in the University of Calgary's kinesiology building is busy. "Where do you want to swim?" I ask Denise Chong. We're on deck surveying the lanes, most of which are occupied by what Chong and I refer to as "serious swimmers"—a breed of amphibious humans who do flip turns, wear swim caps and have mastered the butterfly. They also display preternatural confidence when wearing scant strips of nylon and spandex in public.

"I usually choose the one that's the least crowded," says Chong, an Ottawa-based author. She's in Calgary for the year working on her fifth book as the university's writer-in-residence.

Chong and I are what you call recreational or public swimmers. Neither of us has ever swum competitively or had much formal training. We swim for exercise. We swim for fun. We swim to forget gravity for an hour or two every week.

I went through the colours, yellow to white (maroon twice), growing up. Chong is largely self-taught, but she credits her front crawl to the patience of Pierre Trudeau. She was a senior economic advisor for his government in the early 1980s and would join him for swims after work in the pool at 24 Sussex Drive.

We see an opening in the lane closest to us. Chong pushes off the wall first and I watch her swim down the pool. She has a deliberate, careful stroke—each hand placed thoughtfully ahead of the next. It's this combination of thinking and swimming that made me think

Chong might be able to help. I'm trying to get to the bottom of an idea that surfaces whenever I swim.

For always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

I was at the Talisman Centre (now Repsol) about five years ago when these words first materialized out of the blue. It was a good day in the water; I felt fast, taking one crisp pull after another. In the lane next to me, another swimmer—a guy, maybe in his 40s, but my goggles had fogged up—was also doing the front crawl. But so much slower. Geologic-time slow. And he wasn't struggling or frantically thrashing from one end of the pool to the other. He knew the mechanics. He was trying. But he didn't seem to move. I went up and back, passing him again and again. We were different species, aquatic and terrestrial.

Then someone jumped in the lane on the other side. As fast as I was compared to the first guy, this new guy was that much quicker than me. I was doing the front crawl. He was doing the front crawl. I reached and strained and kicked and gulped for air, but he was in another dimension. I had webbed feet; he had webbed feet and gills. I've been in the water with slower and faster swimmers before, but never such stark contrasts in such close quarters. And that's when an old, slightly modified, idea shook loose:

E E N T H E R O P E S



For always there will be faster and slower swimmers than yourself.

“I actually have a copy of the poster in my office and I’m looking at it right now,” says Daniel Nester, a writer and associate professor of English at the College of Saint Rose in Albany, New York. Turns out the words that surfaced in the pool that day are from *Desiderata*. Nester is an expert on the poem’s unusual origins. “I got it on eBay. It was a vicious auction. I have it tacked up, I’m ashamed to say. I should have gotten it framed.”

Nester explains that the poster—a black and white image of a man on a beach at sunset—was in every hippie living room in the late 1960s and ’70s. Beneath the photo, taken by the Beat-era fixture Larry Keenan, in two columns of text, came *Desiderata*. The opening lines read:

*Go placidly amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may
be in silence.*

And so marches the rest of the poem: eight stanzas, 46 lines, imploring the reader to live his or her best life. “If you’re going to get English-major-y about this poem, it really is a collection of aphorisms,” Nester says. “It’s supposed to motivate you or soothe you and it’s supposed to help you find your centre—find happiness.”

Desiderata had an astonishing influence on popular culture from the 1960s to the 1980s. “It went viral in its own primitive way,” Nester says. Celebrities read it on talk shows. Leonard Nimoy recited it on an album in 1968, but he called it *Spock Thoughts*. A spoken word album with the title track *Desiderata* won a Grammy in 1971.

Max Ehrmann, a lawyer from Terre Haute, Indiana, wrote the poem in 1927. But somehow that fact got lost as the poem earned widespread popularity. A version of *Desiderata* that began circulating in 1956 said the poem was written anonymously and had been found in a church in Baltimore in 1692. Nester says people still visit St. Paul’s, and they’re devastated when they find out the poem was never actually carved into one of its walls.

Mysterious origins bestow mystical qualities. The sense of *Desiderata* as ancient wisdom survives today. Nester has set up a Google alert for the poem and regularly hears about a new ambient dance track with someone reciting it in the background. Jack Sparrow, Johnny Depp’s character in the *Pirates of the Caribbean*

movies, has the poem—all 46 lines—tattooed on his back.

Nester has a theory that the age you discover *Desiderata* influences your degree of appreciation. If you first read it as a fully formed adult, it can seem trite and sentimental. You’re testing the folksy wisdom against too much real-world experience, whereas if you’re young and impressionable, the poem’s idealism finds purchase.

Nester’s writer colleagues loathe *Desiderata*. Most don’t consider it poetry and one calls it “Hallmark card treacle.” But not Nester. His aunt wrote the entire poem out on a card she gave him to celebrate his eighth-grade graduation. It was 1982; he was 14. “It always stuck with me,” he says.

I was 15 or 16 when I first encountered the poem. My friend’s parents had an A-frame cabin in Invermere, where we’d stay on annual ski trips to Panorama. *Desiderata*—the Latin title translates as “things desired,” or “things lacking but needed or wanted”—hung next to the toilet. The ski trips coincided with our first experiments in drinking so I returned, again and again, to that orange-carpeted bathroom. Reading *Desiderata* in progressive states of haziness imprinted the poem in some benthic neural pathway. And decades later, lane swimming at the Talisman—feeling fast or slow in comparison to strangers—coaxed those lines back to the surface:

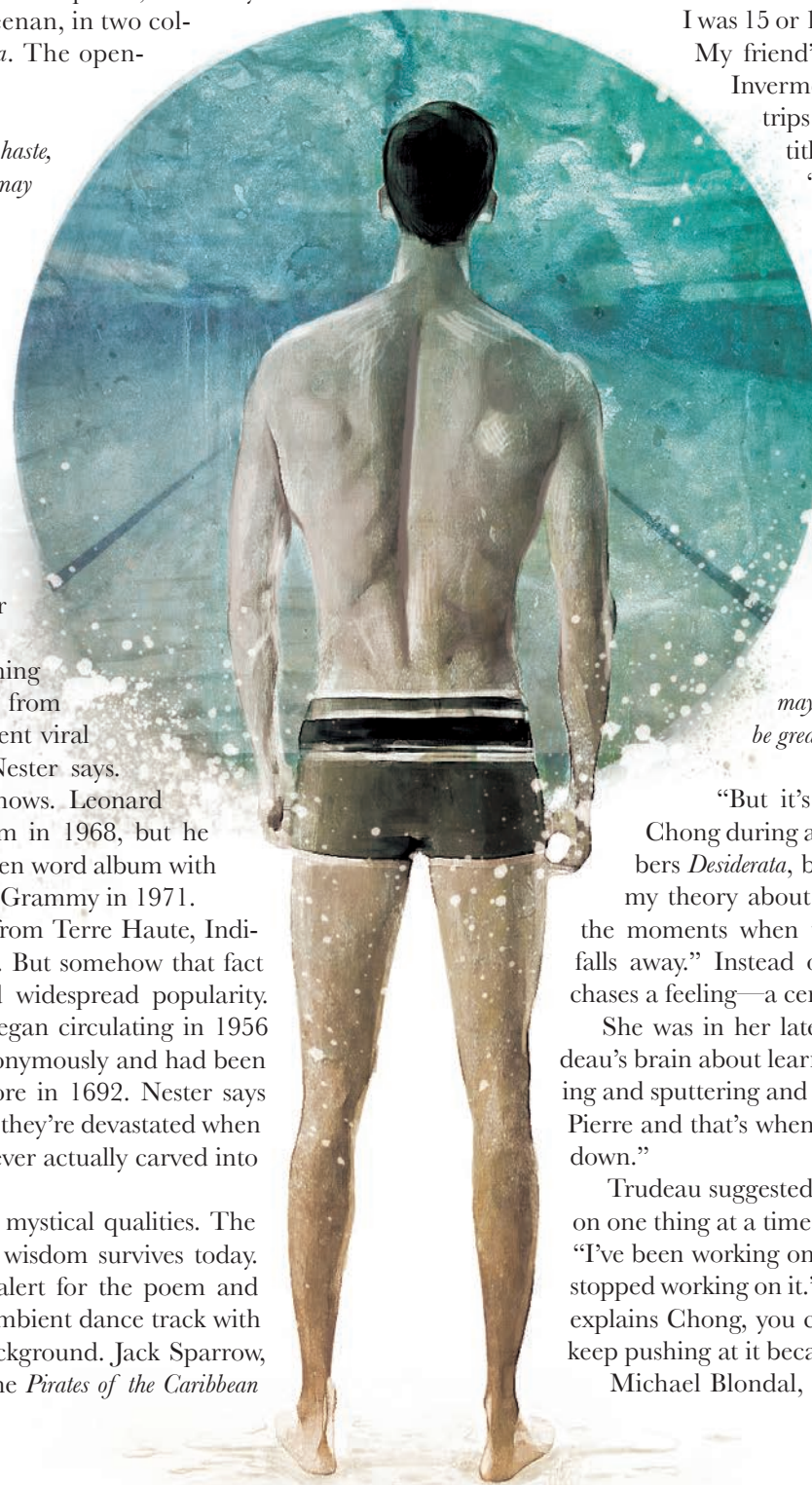
*If you compare yourself to others, you
may become vain or bitter; for always there will
be greater or lesser persons than yourself.*

“But it’s not all about speed,” says Denise Chong during a chat prior to our swim. She remembers *Desiderata*, but is lukewarm on the poem and on my theory about how it applies to swimming. “I like the moments when the speed element, that dimension, falls away.” Instead of chasing other swimmers, Chong chases a feeling—a certain way of being—in the water.

She was in her late 20s when she started picking Trudeau’s brain about learning the front crawl. “I had been trying and sputtering and then I got into this conversation with Pierre and that’s when we started talking about breaking it down.”

Trudeau suggested tackling the stroke in parts, working on one thing at a time and then putting it all back together. “I’ve been working on it ever since,” she says. “I just never stopped working on it.” Once you master the fundamentals, explains Chong, you can reach for something loftier. “You keep pushing at it because you want it to be artful.”

Michael Blondal, head coach of the U of C’s varsity



swim team, agrees that great swimmers achieve a kind of artistry. Blondal recently turned 60 and has spent most of the last 54 years either in the water or on the pool deck. “I missed two Olympic teams—just by a little,” he says. Blondal argues that a huge part of swimming hinges on something called “feel for the water.” It’s a difficult quality to put into words, but the coach says he can hear the moment his swimmers find it again after getting back from summer break. It takes about three weeks, and they swim an average of 50 kilometres a week. “The sound has a rhythm to it. The workout has a rhythm. That’s when I know they got their feel.”

The echo of splashing limbs flattens out when Blondal’s swimmers get their groove back. Feeling the water means working with the fluid, not against it. You’re in tune with the medium. Blondal adds that most people think swimmers shave body hair to reduce drag, but it’s actually to increase their feel for the water. “You’re enhancing what is the most important part,” he says.

Understanding the value of working with the water has changed how Blondal coaches his swimmers. If you wanted to learn how to pull harder and go faster under the old paradigm, you would tie weights to your ankles and muscle your way up and down the pool. “The new way is to put flippers on and swim at a faster speed,” he says.

Basically, swim faster to swim faster. Another training technique is to tie a stretch cord around the swimmer and have her walk down to the end of the lane. As she swims back, somebody pulls her along. The swimmer slices through the water at high speed. “Then you get neurological learning,” Blondal says. The brain remembers the novel sensation of higher velocity and can help the body find its way back to that level. Blondal calls it kinesthetic learning.

You have to make it easy. “We’ve been taught the opposite,” says the coach. “You’ve been taught it; I’ve been taught it.” Blondal draws an analogy with high-school students who write three-hour final exams. “They are making it harder to get a better result,” he says. “They have to make it easier.”

“I’m going to do two more and then I better get going,” says Chong. “I always finish with one breaststroke.” We’ve been taking breaks at the wall of the pool to trade tips and ideas about how to improve our strokes. Chong’s daughter, now a public defender in Washington, D.C., swam competitively growing up and has become her mom’s latest informal coach, providing lots of exercises to improve her technique.



It’s after 1:30 p.m. when Chong leaves for the locker room. The pool has mostly emptied. One swim-capped, serious swimmer is in the far lane, which a green sign on the starter block identifies as the literal fast lane. I notice—with smug, recreational-swimmer satisfaction—that I’m lapping him.

We don’t choose to size each other up; it’s a reflex. Ehrmann’s poem is a conduit for accepting that we’re wired to subconsciously compare ourselves to others. It’s probably a hangover from cons of evolutionary biology, in which competition was the mechanism of change. It’s the same reason we have (and hopefully learn to control) that hair-trigger impulse to hit the gas whenever another car zooms past.

“It says something that I’ve always thought to myself, but never said aloud—maybe to my therapist,” says Nester, who also finds Ehrmann’s lines about the drawbacks of trying to keep pace to be the most resonant. “I’m middle-aged now and I think when you reach a certain age, you start thinking about people who are more successful and thinking about how I could have done something differently.”

The wisdom of this snippet from *Desiderata* flows from understanding that we will always, regardless of where we end up, remain vulnerable to the seesaw of feeling less-than and greater-than.

This is especially true in our era of social media; life was a little easier before daily reminders that a high-school acquaintance is now an orthopedic surgeon who climbs Mount Everest in her spare time.

I take a page from Chong’s playbook and conclude with a length of breaststroke. I have the water to myself. Some of Blondal’s swimmers are stretching on towels laid out by the bleachers.

In an empty pool, as my head bobs above and below the water, I think of another line from *Desiderata*. It was one Pierre Trudeau was fond of quoting. There’s a video on YouTube of the final moments of a press conference from October 30, 1972. The Liberal party lost 38 seats in the federal election that night. The mood is grim. Trudeau looks worn out—even his sideburns appear frazzled—but calm. “Is there a phrase I can re-quote to you that I used some months ago?” he asks.

*Whether or not it’s clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.*

He’s positively impish as he adds “good-night” and rises from the table. ⑤