

The Joy of Swimming



Charlie and Jo used to swim almost daily. They didn't know each other but they swam in the same sea. They both loved it, and the challenges the big ocean presented each time they stepped into the water. A sea swim could be really tiring, but, Oh so stimulating; refreshing too. Different experience every day.

Then Jo got stung by a poisonous jellyfish lurking in the water. Its poison was potent, and made Jo very ill. She thought she'd never be able to swim again, she was afraid to even go back to the beach.

Charlie was a strong swimmer - usually swimming half a mile or more each time. Then one day, as he swam quietly back to shore, a freak wave appeared from behind and, in a flash, Charlie's back was physically broken by its enormous crushing power. He was lucky to survive the incident.

Neither of them would swim again for a long, long time. But they had never actually lost the love of the water, nor the joy of swimming. The yearning was still there inside, even though returning to swimming seemed so impossible to each of them. They just couldn't even contemplate trying, never mind doing it; for ongoing complex reasons that no one could have predicted, and very few understood.

Jo walked down to the beach many times, desperately wanting to step back into the water... but each time an almost visceral recoil, a very physical reaction would prevent even her toes from entering the water, for fear of hidden jellyfish. Sometimes even the thought of jellyfish potentially being there, would be enough to trigger her migraines, and Jo would have to put aside the whole matter of swimming again, sometimes for many weeks.

But Jo never gave up wanting to swim again. Jo still wants to swim even now. She's a good swimmer - really good, much admired for her grace and style.

Charlie was advised against even trying to swim, for at least a year, until his injuries healed. Thereafter, perhaps occasional light swimming might be okay.. but the only way he could find out his capacity for it, would be to try. As a previously strong and fast distance swimmer, the prospect of just playing in the shallows saddened him greatly. He really missed the adrenaline rush of open water swimming, with its swirling currents and strong tides. Things he'd always managed to take in his stride, or rather his swimming stroke. Until that wave hit him from behind.

Of course Jo could have gone to practice in an indoor pool somewhere, but the indoor pools these days only allowed entry to active and regular swimmers who had to adhere to a fixed swimming timetable, and Jo just couldn't guarantee her fitness, nor even face swimming in the open ocean as her first step. Not allowed to use the indoor pools. Too frightened to try the sea. She was left no choice but to sit on the sidelines and just watch others swim.

Charlie was always a sea swimmer by choice, but on which beach would the current and waves be safe? For him to test his strength and stamina? So many questions. So many unknowns. No one to ask. No one seemed to see either of them, or care about them anymore. Long forgotten, unilaterally labelled as "ex-swimmers"

Jo would sit on the beach on a towel, alone, for hours at a time - with knees folded close to her chest - in deep thought and gazing out at the bright blue sea.. longingly. Wanting so much to be part of the camaraderie of those happy families playing together in the waves, those groups of friends laughing and throwing a ball around, even envying the one lone swimmer who ploughed back and forth swimming parallel to the shore. Jo wanted to be part of all that again. But she was was scared, so very very scared. Jelly fish stings that almost kill, are not easily forgotten. And spotting a poisonous jellyfish lurking underwater is pretty hard at the best of times. Her instinct told her to stay out of the water. But her heart still wanted to swim.

Jo walked right to the edge of the water so many times, then found she could only look in, not actually step into the shallows, even when the seabed was still visible and the water clear enough so there likely was no risk of anything being there that could sting. Though her logical brain told her it was safe, her body just wouldn't let her enter the water at all.

Charlie was so frightened of the previously unrecognised power of the ocean, that it was years, not months, before he even walked along a beach at the waters edge again. The sea held new threats, unexpected hostilities, that in his many decades of swimming he had never before experienced - until that fateful day. Could the same happen to him again? Everyone said it had been a freak accident - but no one could guarantee his future safety.

The only advice that Jo and Charlie were ever given by the other swimmers, and swimming club managers, was to "Just jump in, it'll be fine".

For different reasons, neither of them could believe that, and so the sense of isolation and despair just grew and grew over time. A grieving for past pleasures that was both painful and unrelenting. And with no obvious way to recreate the previous joy.

Then all the indoor pools closed down completely, leaving them with only the raging sea to return to, if they ever wanted to swim again. New rules appeared almost weekly, that soon prevented anyone swimming in the sea without "a valid certificate of recent swimming ability". But how to get one if you can't even get a toe in the water? And haven't been able to swim for almost a year? Or more.

They talked to the uniformed lifeguard, hoping for some advice.

The lifeguard told them bluntly...

"Oh, we are not here to help you. Our job is just to sit on the elevated seat, with our binoculars, and just watch everything. Though, of course, if you do get into any trouble, then we'll come and get you".

Charlie and Jo began to lose faith. How would they ever get to swim again? And where to try?

One day, as Jo was again sat on her beach towel, alone, ruminating, (but beginning to reconcile that perhaps it was no longer worth her even trying) a woman appeared quietly by her side, and gently introduced herself. "Hi. I'm Wendy. I noticed you here the other day, and I just wondered if you'd like some company. You looked a bit lonely. But, please forgive me if I'm mistaken. I'd just like to help if I can".

Jo looked up at the kind open face, and felt an unexpected human warmth wrapping itself around her cold, folded legs, and somehow warming her from the inside.

Hesitantly, Jo said "I'm Jo. Thank you for asking. Yes, I am a bit lonely, but I really don't want to bother you. I'll be fine. The problem really is that I don't really know who to ask for help. I used to really love my swimming, you know. But no one seems interested in what I want to do anymore, I think they've forgotten me. And they're all so busy with their own lives, out having fun like that big crowd over there in the water" Jo pointed to the family splashing in the waves with laughter all around.

"That's actually my family!" said Wendy. "Would you like to meet some of them?"

Jo recoiled a bit, too nervous to explain to this kind human, that just walking over there and into the sea water was far, far too daunting. But Wendy seemed to sense that uncertainty, and almost intuitively, continued, "Of course, I'm quite sure you won't want to rush headlong into cold sea water just to meet a bunch of complete strangers out in waves. Why don't I ask a couple of them to come over and say Hi?"

Jo smiled. Her heart rate slowed down again. She felt at ease.

Here was someone who really understood, without her needing to justify anything. That made her feel comfortable enough to say "Oh I love the sea, I'm genuinely dying to go swimming again. But I'm just so afraid I'll get stung again by a jellyfish. So I can't seem to even go paddling anymore." Then Jo paused, fearful she'd said too much already, waiting for the usual ridicule or disinterest.

Instead, Wendy sat down on the sand, close enough to be friendly, far enough to not intrude. And said gently "Gosh, that must be such a horrible way to feel." And then fell silent.

Jo felt the unspoken connection between them growing, even as they both sat there, just looking out to sea, neither talking at all. It was Jo who spoke next. "I feel so stupid too. I used to swim all the time. I'm a good swimmer, really good. But now I'm scared of even entering the water. I have tried so many times, but people just laugh at me when I try, or tell me that all I need to do is take a deep breath and jump in. They don't seem to understand that I can't".

Wendy nodded, without speaking, and waited. Kind eyes turned towards Jo, sitting side by side not confrontationally. After a time Wendy enquired softly "Is there anything I could do to help?" And she waited again.

Jo liked this person who seemed to understand her frustrations, who seemed to recognise her need to overcome these hidden challenges, that others denied even existed. Challenges she knew still blocked her way. "That's so very kind of you Wendy. I don't know what you could do for me. But your offer alone has made me feel so much better already. Thank you."

They sat a moment longer in comfortable silence. Then Wendy added "I had an experience once that made me feel really unsettled. I think I might understand some of your feelings about trying to swim again. Perhaps if I tell you a bit about my story, we can see if we have something in common". And Wendy explained about her own return to swimming after she had moved house, lost her job, and then witnessed a drowning incident all within a few weeks, that had understandably put her right off swimming for many months. Both of them welled up as Wendy shared her own story. Her trials, her false restarts. But Wendy said she was beginning to enjoy swimming again now.

Jo, by now sitting back on her hands, legs stretched out, and turning to Wendy, said quietly "Wendy, I can't thank you enough for sharing that story with me. I have thought for so long that I was the only one to feel the way I do. It has all been so isolating and lonely. I feel so completely forgotten - and misunderstood - by all the other swimmers out there. Now I realise I am not alone." She cried for a moment, with the relief.

The sun broke through the clouds above and for a time, they just sat together enjoying the warm rays and feeling content and quite comfortable in each others company, despite the newness of their meeting, with no expectation of anything in either direction. Just two people sat on a beach together in the sunshine.

Wendy turned to Jo and again making warm eye contact said, "Jo, it's just an idea... Perhaps I could help you to find a more private place where it feels safe enough to explore the water. I know such a place. I'm really happy to come with you, if that would help. I know of a really quiet little cove - right at the far end of the beach behind that headland over there. A cove where the sand is silvery soft under the toes, where there are no underwater rocks or seaweed, and where the water is always crystal clear and calm, literally just tiny ripples moving gently and lapping at the shoreline. It's very sheltered too. No wind. And barely overlooked by anyone. Would you like to go there one day - I mean when you feel ready?"

Jo smiled. An eye smile. Here was someone who really understood. Now she really knew she was not alone anymore.

They chatted awhile, and agreed to meet for a coffee the next week, at the cafe overlooking the sea - just to chat about swimming and other stuff too. Life stuff. Family stuff. Hobbies. Wendy helped Jo to regain confidence in herself, her aspirations, and to begin to break down the numerous challenges into small steps that could be taken one at a time - together, and with

Wendy there by her side to guide, to support - not to hassle her. Jo herself would set the direction, and the pace.

A couple of weeks later, they visited the quiet cove together. It was beautiful. The first time Jo just walked along the sand, chatting with Wendy, and took a photo of the watery scene together to take home. She felt happy when she looked at it. Over subsequent visits, Jo gradually walked closer to the waters edge, letting the warm ripples dance over her toes, and it felt good. She even dared to splash! This was progress. Bit by bit, at Jo's pace, they walked together, and paddled at the secret cove together until Jo was knee deep, then thigh deep, then waist deep in the warm water and laughing as they threw a beach ball back and forth - just for the joy of it. She felt ready to swim. And she did. She struggled to catch her breath at first, as her body slipped underwater, and then she remembered how to swim, her arms reaching out in a smooth and graceful rhythm again. Albeit for just a few yards, then she went ashore, heart pounding.

A month or so later, Charlie was walking along the narrow cliff top path, as usual out walking on his own, and now thinking to himself that perhaps he'd just give up on the the whole idea of ever going swimming again. He was a very private man, who didn't usually discuss his thoughts with anyone.

Something colourful caught his attention, just at the periphery of his vision. He stopped. There was a tiny cove below, one he hadn't ever spotted before. It was beautiful. Two women were swimming together, and he could see the bright colours of their swimsuits through the crystal clear water. They both seemed so very happy. He felt a pang of envy inside. A yearning. One of the women was almost crying with joy as she swam faster and stronger, the other woman then stood up clapping so enthusiastically as she watched her friend swim across the full width of the cove. The two women embraced as they emerged from the water, and walked up the sand together, grinning with pride as if they'd just swum the English Channel. "Who are they?", he wondered to himself. And then he walked on, lost again in his own despair.

The following day he saw a poster nailed on a tree trunk near the long beach. It asked just the one simple question:

Would you like to swim again?

We can help. Give us a call.

With a small photo of the same two women he'd seen swimming in the cove, and listing some contact details.

A year later, there was a huge beach sports event on the long open beach - including various open water distance swims, and a water polo tournament, with a sociable picnic in the sand dunes afterwards. Not involving your average sports team, but a bunch of really happy faces, men and women of all ages and physiques, rich in experience, and all enjoying each others company. When the polo match began, Charlie took the goal end out in the deeper water; Jo was to be the shooter, and Wendy helped whichever team was struggling more - swapping direction every few minutes to help where necessary. Because in this game, they were all winners, regardless of the goal score. The goals were just numbers. What gave the most pleasure to them all, was the Welcome Back, and simply being able to swim again, and participate.