
S W I M

R I D E

R U N

B R E A T H E

*How I Lost
a Triathlon
and Caught
My Breath*

JENNIFER GARRISON BROWNELL



THE PILGRIM PRESS
CLEVELAND

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments . . . VII

Introduction . . . IX

PART I | SWIM

- 1 In Which I Jump into the Pool . . . I
- 2 A Whole Lotta Deep . . . 5
- 3 Lake Superior Did Not Teach Me to Swim . . . 8
- 4 What Is Impossible? . . . 12
- 5 The Problem Is the Ears . . . 14
- 6 Why My Husband Can't Swim . . . 17
- 7 Learning by Doing Works for Swimming, Prayer,
and Other Things . . . 21
- 8 Believing Is Believing . . . 27
- 9 I Used to Be Afraid of Public Speaking . . . 31
- 10 . . . And Many Other Things . . . 33

PART II | RIDE

- 11 In Which I Ride a Bike . . . 41
- 12 Bikes, I've Known a Few . . . 44
- 13 Easy Is Hard. And Vice Versa . . . 50
- 14 Falling Down, Literally and Not So Literally . . . 54

CONTENTS

15	Tri Training, Marriage, and a Girl Called Ruth . . .	60
16	Parents, Feminism, and Being a Girl . . .	71
17	In the Family Photo Album of Good and Evil . . .	77
18	Puke on the Plane . . .	83
19	Seeing the Light from the Yoga Mat . . .	88
20	How'd I Move Out of This Body Anyway? . . .	91
21	A Caregiver's Complicated Dance . . .	94
	PART III RUN	
22	The Dreaded Run . . .	101
23	What You Want to See When You Want to See the Future . . .	103
24	The Hospital Where It Began . . .	107
25	The Outsider Complex . . .	112
26	Getting on Like a House on Fire . . .	119
27	Why I Can't Ever, Ever, Ever Get Sick. And What Happens When I Do . . .	126
28	Floating Away and Coming Back to Earth . . .	132
29	There's No Medal for Fifth from the End . . .	135
	PART IV BREATHE	
CODA	Swim, Ride, Run, Breathe, and . . . Surf. Or, On Living Exuberantly . . .	142

INTRODUCTION



I'm not like you, gym rat. I'm not even like you, moderately in-shape rat.

I'm more like you. Yes, you, over in the corner with your nose in a book. I'm the uncoordinated, voracious reader with too many knees and elbows and not enough guts. I'm the one picked last for every team, every time. I know, I know. Everyone says that, and it's not possible for *everyone* to be last but, really, I insist that I am. The last.

The story I want to tell you goes like this: I never did a single athletic thing in my life. I know, I know. Everyone says that, too. But that sentence has ellipses at the end and is usually followed by “. . . since I was on dance line” or “. . . since I ran track in middle school” or “. . . since I climbed Mt. Kombatabrutius.” My sentence ends with a full stop. I never did a single athletic thing in my life. Period.

Until today. Today I'm hanging around a pool waiting for the whistle that means the sprint triathlon will be starting. Will this be it? I've been training for a while and still don't feel much like an athlete, but I'm wondering if this will be the day that I stop being whatever I was before and

SWIM, RIDE, RUN, BREATHE

start being what Samuel Johnson in his wisdom called “strong of body, vigorous, lusty, robust.”¹

Me, sitting here on the edge of a pool getting ready to start a sprint triathlon. This did not begin today. It started last year, during a conversation with a stranger, a woman who was both heavier and older than I am, who said, “In the triathlon, the only thing was, I didn’t want to be the fattest and I didn’t want to be the slowest, and I wasn’t either.” And why this particular pool, this particular triathlon? That started with that conversation, too.

“What triathlon was it, the one where you were not the oldest?” I asked, innocently, as if I were just making conversation and not gathering vital information.

“It’s in McMinnville?” she replied with that lift at the end that turns a statement into a question.

So maybe my triathlon started when I went home and looked it up online. The McMinnville Oregon Parks and Rec Sprint Triathlon promised a “relaxed” race that would accommodate all levels and be welcoming to beginners. It was in May, months and months away. It would be warm and, possibly (although this *is* Oregon), not raining by then. And it was a sprint triathlon, the baby of all triathlons with the shortest distances. I think of those distances in miles rather than kilometers and I round down because then it seems even shorter—swim half a mile, bike about twelve miles, run about three miles. I read the reassuring words and looked at the numbers. I wondered if maybe I could do it.

Or maybe my triathlon started a couple of months later in a conversation with a man from church about his experience being a triathlon transition assistant for his son. The conversation morphed from a story about that event into a pep talk about setting goals. “You gotta set a goal,” he said.

1. Johnson’s famous dictionary was published in 1755, after eight years of effort and with the help of at least six assistants. See, I told you. More bookworm than gym rat.

INTRODUCTION

I'm not much more of a goal-setter than I am an athlete. Wait, let me put that in the past: I wasn't much more of a goal-setter than I was an athlete. That day, I set a goal.

Are you still with me, gym rat? Because *your* environment has become *mine* now. My environment used to be gently lit, quiet places with worn carpeting and the enticing scent of old books. Libraries and churches—those were my buildings. The librarian never had to shush me. She smiled over her glasses as she pressed her stamp onto an inkpad and then gently onto the card she slipped into the back of the book.

And I always liked being in churches. When I was ten, I was an acolyte, a role that came with few actual duties that I remember. Mostly I remember sitting with my friend Amy in these big thrones someone had stuck in the back of the church. The adults were preoccupied, their backs to us, so as long as we weren't too disruptive, they didn't care what we did. We laughed silently, passed notes, whispered little gossips, confident in that sweet spot between perfect safety and perfect freedom. My pastor dad's voice speaking and my mom's voice singing provided a familiar and comfortable soundtrack.

The school in our little town didn't really have a gymnasium. Instead it had a basement with a floor painted gray and a gym teacher who visited once a week from a bigger school. On days the gym teacher wasn't there, our regular teacher took us out into the yard. Then, gymnasium time was listening to a record with a song that teased us about our chicken fat while we bony pre-adolescents performed humiliating exercises such as touching our toes ten times. The word "gymnasium" comes from a Greek word meaning "to exercise naked." Of course we had clothes on, but in that little schoolyard gymnasium, I sure understood exactly what it was like to exercise naked.

In my imagination, I'm no longer naked in the schoolyard. In my imagination, I'm standing at the door of a real gymnasium, a building. In my imagination, I'm sweeping through the front doors with full confidence that I actually belong here. In my imagination, you are following me, and this is what we see.

SWIM, RIDE, RUN, BREATHE

When we get in the front door, we follow the intoxicating smell of chlorine. We'll have to walk through a slightly moldy plastic sheet cut into strips, around a corner, and down a long corridor to the locker room. Don't breathe too deeply here. The chlorine smell can't quite cover the musty too-many-wet-clothes smell. Walk through the shower and rinse off as the sign instructs. Don't look too closely at what has gathered in the drains since the last time—1997?—they were cleaned. Keep walking through the warm damp until we are beside the swimming pool. And then, look! That's me! In the pool! And I'm swimming!

I wasn't always moving even when I was in the water. There was that one day, a few months into training for the tri, when I was in the pool and wearing a swimsuit, but I was stopped. And sobbing. This was probably not what Debra (who actually calls herself an athlete and has the rugby chops to prove it) had in mind when she agreed to give me a swim lesson. I'd been teaching myself how to swim by lurking around the local community center, spying on real swimmers underwater through big Italian triathlete goggles. After months of practicing what I learned by this method, I still got out of breath with every lap. Deb said that she'd help me figure out why.

She watched me swim one length and, as usual, I got totally winded. I slung one arm over the gutter to hold myself up and wailed between breaths, "I can't figure it out! What's wrong with me?"

Besides being an athlete, Debra is also a truth-teller.

"This isn't about the swimming," she said. "Your swimming is fine. Something else inside of you is making it hard for you to breathe. You need to breathe. You know how. Now do it."

And standing in the shallow end of the pool, tears and snot running down my face, and lifeguards and other swimmers looking on, Deb prayed with me. After that, I know what makes it hard to breathe because I remember a particular day in the pool. I'm just about twelve and getting ready for gym class my first day at Woodland Junior High School. I've just moved to a new small city from a little place on an island, where I learned to swim in lakes, not in pools. In fact, I've spent a lot of my life

INTRODUCTION

splashing into lakes and paddling around, or hopping up and down on one foot to avoid leaches. But I never logged much pool time—certainly never enough time to swim an actual lap!

My legs are completely ridiculous in the scratchy slow-drying black swimsuit I've been issued for class. They are as white as the snow outside, for one thing, and as long as a stork's. The only way I can think to solve this problem is to hide them, and the only way to hide them is by keeping my bumpy knee socks on.

I've been assured I don't have to swim, since it's my first day, but the walk to the bleachers by myself is just as confounding as swimming a lap would have been. I didn't reckon on the floor of the pool deck being so wet. The wet soaks the soles of my socks and then slowly, ever so slowly, wicks up, dampening my wet socks halfway up to my knobby knees. It feels like I'm tortuously wetting my pants in reverse, and I'm sure everyone else can tell, too.

The fear that had made me breath-less is not not-being-able-to-swim fear, but everyone-will-laugh fear.

I guess there are other, more primal fears, but if I scratch the surface of many of my fears, everyone-will-laugh is at the root. When I was in classes at Woodland Junior High, I learned that there are two reactions to fear—fight or flight. Jaimal Yogis, author of the book *The Fear Project*, says that scientists now identify three—fight, flight, or freeze. “Fear won't go away. Fear is there for a reason, a survival tool. But we can change how we react and view our most primal emotion. It can be a huge deal that becomes literally what we are. Or it can just be an occasional flicker on the ocean of mind.”²

Over the years, fear was more than a flicker; it was what I was, how I defined myself. Now, I'm still afraid sometimes, but not every minute like I was for so many years. Fear didn't win this one. After my lesson

2. I love his book (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2013). But if you can't commit to a whole book, this actual quote comes from Jaimal Yogi's much shorter article at Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jaimal-yogis/fear-project_b_1512298.html.

SWIM, RIDE, RUN, BREATHE

with Deb, I got in the pool and actually swam, except when I rolled back and looked up, thinking about being a mermaid. Which is pleasant, but this is no time for dreaming. We are touring, so let's continue the tour. It is time to heave out of the pool, shower again, pull clothes on over damp, sticky skin and head out to another part of the gymnasium—the room where they keep the stationary bikes.

Can you find me? I'm the one with the grin on her face, pumping her legs with all her might. When it's going well—and this is my tour, so let's imagine that it is going well—I can keep up a steady rate of eighty-five rotations per minute for thirty minutes, which is medium slow for a real cyclist, but amazing for me. More than once a second, much more quickly than it takes to read these words, my thighs pull up and my calves push up and then they both swing around and down and my legs have formed another circle, and another, and another.

My husband, Jeff, has a machine we call the bicycle, too. Let's add Jeff's bike to this room of the imaginary gymnasium so you can see it. It's not a bicycle like mine. In order for Jeff to use his bike, I kneel down and strap his feet to the pedals, and a motor moves his legs in a circle and then another and another. Jeff has what is broadly called muscular dystrophy. His more specific diagnosis is called by its proper name, spinal muscular atrophy, or its nickname, SMA.

Jeff was already in a wheelchair a decade and half ago when we crossed the lines of friendship to become lovers, but at the time I hardly noticed. What I did notice was his indomitable intellect, patience, beautiful eyes, depth, candor, artistic talent, remarkably deep speaking voice, air of complete trustworthiness, spiritual curiosity, unexpectedly vigorous laugh, the surprising sweetness of the tiny sound he made when sneezing.

And the kissing.

I'd done quite a lot of kissing before but I'm pretty sure I didn't really get the point of it until I bent near Jeff to pick something up and he put his hand on the back of my head and kissed me for the first time.

I know what you see when you look at the pair of us. You see a woman who never stops moving, whose legs go around and around and

INTRODUCTION

around. And you see a man strapped to a machine. Stay here with us in this room for a while. Things are both more and less complicated than you imagine. On our ride, sometimes we coast, sometimes we pedal, sometimes we push uphill. I will show you. But, for now, let's move on. We have another room to visit on the tour of the gymnasium.

Unlike the transition from pool to bicycle, I don't have to change clothes when I move to the track. But I might change, thinking it will help. I might do other things. I might lace my shoes tighter. Lace them looser. Get advice. Warm up before. Warm up after. Take two pills. Put on a warm-up jacket. Take it off. Get some different advice. Try a new bra. Wear an inspiring t-shirt. Put smart podcasts on the headphones, or music or prayers.

It won't matter what I do; it will hurt.

I thought I just didn't feel like it, that's why I didn't run. I didn't know it would hurt. A lot of people I know run, and it doesn't seem to hurt them. I can picture myself at eight, standing in front of the kitchen cupboard, the bottom one designed to hold the big pots. It doesn't hold pots. Instead, it's crammed with cases of granola bars. Should I have cinnamon? Or honey oat? I can choose either, or both; there will be plenty more—enough to last for months, enough so I will actually get sick of them. What are people both as health-conscious and as poor as my parents doing with cases of sugary snacks? That's because, for a while, my dad both ran (as in organized) and ran (as in ran) a marathon on our little island. And the granola bars are the leftovers. There have always been runners in my life. Runners, running.

My grandfather had the hearty name Maranatha Sleight Garrison. His name sounds a little like "marathon" but really means "come, Lord Jesus!" Scholars wonder if this untranslatable word is a prayer or a curse. Maybe it's both. Maranatha seemed old and frail by the time I knew him, decimated by diabetes, strokes, heart attacks, and perhaps some unspoken disappointment. In his younger days, my great-uncle remembers that Maranatha was a runner, remembers his long legs stretching down the dusty roads of India, where his missionary parents raised him. My dad

SWIM, RIDE, RUN, BREATHE

does not remember his father running, but, along with pastoring, running was encoded in my dad's DNA.

Since I can remember, my dad's been a runner and a pastor too. Sometimes dad was a runner who did not run, but instead smoked cigarettes and lifted firewood and hassled my brothers into shoveling the walk with him. But in those days, I still thought of him as a runner. I just thought of him as a runner who did not run. I guess those things must be encoded in my DNA, too. The pastor part I picked up, the running part didn't take somehow.

One year, my dad and a family friend ran a marathon the day before we went camping together. Our friend did not come out of her tent much during the camping trip because, her husband explained, her toenails had turned black and were falling off one by one. I thought this was gross, but I did not think about how it would, you know, hurt.

Walking? I can walk for miles, for hours. Every time I train I think that I'm not sure why running is so different, why it hurts like it does. I think of Maranatha Sleight, his long legs churning the dust. I think of my dad, kicking his smoking habit for the third, fourth, fifth time with tiny pieces of Trident gum broken into even tinier quarters and chewed one at a time. I think of him returning from a run, propping his shoes against the back door, stretching out. I imagine I am doing it wrong, but I cannot seem to do it right. Every now and then, I get a little rush, the endorphin high that other runners talk about. But mostly, running is just something to be endured. Here in my imaginary gymnasium, I grit my teeth and do a lap, or two, or three.

After that, we limp toward the little quiet corner where rolled-up mats lean against the wall in neat stacks. I take one down and sit on it. Breathe in, breathe out. This is the special place and time for quieting, as the yogis say, the mind-body. Breathing. In and out. In and out.

It has not always been this easy. More times than I can count when Elijah was small, I called the nurse hotline to report, "My baby is having a hard time breathing." The first thing the faceless nurse on the other end of the line always asks: "Is he blue?"

INTRODUCTION

What I think is, “If the baby were *blue*, do you think I would dig around in my wallet to find the white insurance card hidden behind all the other white cards, call an 800 number, and follow a labyrinth of voice prompts to get to a human at last? Would I do all that to get to you, and ask you what to do if the child were *blue*? Wouldn’t I instead wrap the baby in the stars quilt the church ladies made for him? Wouldn’t I run into the street holding him above my head and keening? If the baby were blue, a more primal response than a call to the nurse hotline seems to be in order.”

That is what I think. But what I say is, “No, the baby is not blue.” Then I describe the symptoms to her as calmly as I can and listen while the nurse on the other end tells me that, yes, it is time to go to the hospital. Now. Again.

The baby is not blue today. The baby is a very sturdy ten-year-old. Those times are past. Breathe. In and out. In and out.

Athletic endeavor is not merely like life. Athletic endeavor is life. This is a cliché, I have discovered much to my surprise halfway through my life, that is actually true.

I thrash and gasp and eventually move forward. As in the pool, so in my life.

Other times, my legs go around and around and I fly forward without, it seems, any effort. As on the bicycle, so in my life.

Sometimes, things just hurt and no amount of preparation or advice can make them better. Only time and rest can do that. As in running, so in my life.

My body knows how to breathe, the lungs rising and falling, in and out. Sometimes I forget. I hold my breath. I choke. As in tri training, so in life.

The tri was not, as I thought for a few months after the training, the end of things. My knee would heal, and I would continue to stretch and swim and move. As I took one step forward, one step back in my body, my spirit did, too. As a pastor, my work absorbs many hours of my waking days and often occupies my dreams, too. I thought I was getting into

SWIM, RIDE, RUN, BREATHE

tri training to put all that church stuff aside for an hour or two a day. But it didn't really work that way. The last thing I expected was that running a triathlon would help me understand my faith better, but that's just what happened.

You already know that my grandparents and their parents before them were missionaries. My dad says, when someone asks him why he sticks with it, that Christianity is his mother tongue. There are many reasons to be suspicious of Christianity, I suppose. Over the years, I've heard most of them and thought the rest. But there's at least one reason to appreciate it. Jesus came to us incarnate—in a body. My husband jokes that “incarnate” is the fancy church word for “we are all meat in a sack.” But we are also so very much more than meat in a sack.

As I trained, my body got stronger, and so did my spirit. I understood some of those faith stories that previously seemed like a total mystery to me, and I tried to preach about them, explaining them to myself by explaining them to other people. So some of those Bible characters snuck unexpectedly into this writing too, a reminder that it was not just my body that got stretched, molded, transformed by training for the tri. It was my spirit, too.

The door to the gymnasium is open. Whether you have been here all your life, or last ran screaming from here in middle school and swore never to look back, welcome. Let me show you around.