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Learning to Swim

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Author Bio

Taylor Smart is an International Affairs and Economics double major. Although he realizes it sounds incredibly profound (people's reactions to his majors entertain him), but the truth is much less complex because he is unsure about what he will do after graduation. For his story, his cousin was both curious and cheerful and he wanted his personality to come through as he retold his story.

Taylor Smart

Learning to Swim

Four generations ago my father's great-grandfather built a giant mahogany grandfather clock which was to be passed from one first born son to the next. Had my mother taken this clock as a warning of time's strong hold on my dad's ancestry, she would not have laughed when, as a baby, the first thing I crawled to was not her or my father but was in fact that wooden grandfather clock. For hours I would sit and watch it; she called it the "Smart family curse", and I've yet to think of a better name. Time was our siren. Sometimes I would sit, watching the pendulum swing and the second hand spin, and I would feel my father's hand gently brush upon my shoulder; he had always understood. My dad had experienced the same curiosity as a child. A curiosity he often had to justify to my mother by telling her, "Leonardo da Vinci was always fascinated by clocks! Our son is the new da Vinci, my dear!"

It wasn't the mechanism within the clock that interested us. Clocks are fairly simple to make all you need is a weight of some sort, a couple gears, a pendulum and a good sense of time. Our fascination derived instead from the fact that as you watch a clock, you begin to notice a slight but very distinct difference in between each second. You notice every swing of the pendulum is unique. Almost if more could be done within one second than another, even though the actual duration of the swing always remains the same.

It took me exactly nine years to solve this riddle, and on that day I had once again been staring at the time, waiting for my cousins to come. My mom told me they should be showing up any minute, so I watched the clock count, in its usual slow manner, and measured the seconds; assuming the minutes they were associated with were also passing by.

I was always big for my age; everything from my foot size to my hair length was above average. My eyes often changed depending upon my mood: more green than brown when I was happy, more brown than green when I was thinking, and always black when I got angry. Like most kids I was highly energetic, and to be honest, I'm not entirely sure how I didn't die before the age of eight. At four I could start a two wheel bike – I specify start because I never properly stopped to get off. At five I moved west, to a new neighborhood complete with towering houses and many tempting, terrifying, ways to entertain a child. Here I met Bryce, who

would run with me and play tag atop the roofs of the unfinished houses. By six and a half, I was biking off ramps and catching bees in jars, and by seven I was playing with power tools. I was a pistol, but I was nothing if not patient.

My aunt and her family came fourteen minutes after I originally expected them, but as usual, tracking the clock kept my mind fairly occupied.

The dynamic of my family was rather unlike any other. When we gathered, we didn't do so to reunite or reconnect. We were already connected to each other; we were already a single unit. Small talk was therefore a foreign thing to me, purely because my family was so well versed with one another that we found no need for it. Thus, when my aunt arrived, my mom immediately grabbed her, popped in a tape she'd just recently bought, and shoved one side of the head phones in my aunt's ear, keeping the other for herself. As the two started dancing and singing to an invisible beat, my sister grabbed my older cousin Josh and left to go show him a new book of she'd found, and I stole away with his younger brother Jordan to switch into our swim suits so we could relish in the warmth of the sun and the cool of the water. I was nine and he was six, but he was my pair, just as his older brother Josh, and my sister Ashley were pairs. He and I were forever destined to sit next to each other at Christmas dinners. We were forever tied together during our families annual three legged race. We were forever tied together during our families annual three legged race, and we were forever united. He looked up to me for my age, and I looked up to him for his wisdom. And, with our ambitious young minds, the two of us were designed to change the world.

When I was eight, I wrote down in my letter to Santa that I wanted swimming instructions for Christmas. It was my dream to join the swim team later in life, and I jumped on every opportunity I had to practice; my younger cousin visiting was the perfect excuse.

We sprinted down the stairs, racing to see who could get in the water first; my younger cousin beat me by a hair, and we almost immediately began splashing each other. Our juvenile energy, of course, eventually subsided and he crawled atop a floating chair, as I began my daily practice regimen.

I've never really told anyone this; I suppose I've never thought it was relevant, but for some reason, I've never forgotten it. I remember very clearly that while I swam in my back yard pool I sometimes stumbled on a uniquely strange sensation; below the water, I felt as though I could breathe. It was a feeling purely associated with my pool; I think it had something to do with the water.

My routine always began with a quick swim to the bottom of the pool. From there, I could look up at the water's ceiling; it transformed everything. At the time I had many books about changing the world with wands and dreams, and very few pertaining to the physics of water.

Therefore, to me, this ceiling truly was a work of magic. What else could make the nose of my dog look as though it belonged to a cat? What else could transform my house into a circle and my sister into a Picasso painting? It was as if the water amplified everything you saw; enhanced it, forced you to appreciate its natural shape by distorting it and showing you its potential alternatives. I loved it.

Looking up, I saw the chair my cousin sat in and gently moved it to the shallow end. It was much harder to flip in the deep side. Another laughable scuffle between us and he reunited with the chair, as I returned to my swimming. I was doing laps now, and I felt so free. I found myself so entranced with the freedoms water gave me, as it simultaneously strips the effects of gravity and slows the pendulum of motion, that I forgot the freedoms it took away, like free oxygen. I was experiencing one of those backyard pool moments; the sensation was upon me and I knew if I were to open my mouth I would be able to breathe. I would be able to swim forever.

But the chance was stripped from me. My older cousin Josh was staring down at me and yelling something. Under the water, I couldn't make out what he said, so I surfaced and quickly realized he had a squirt gun in his hands. He shot me in the face. Not one to give up, I jumped out of the pool and grabbed a towel, not for drying off, but instead for blocking the violent shots of water. I noticed my sister Ashley sprinting out of the house; she grabbed a towel and fought by my side. The battle was a valiant one; two rather small siblings pitted against their stronger, older, somewhat pubescent cousin.

He would raise his arm and aim the gun at my sister; I would jump on him and take the blow for her. She would grab at his legs, and he would avoid with a quick sidestep he'd learned on the basketball team. It wasn't until we began using the towels to wrap him that we began advancing on. I swung my towel as hard as I could towards his face, temporarily blinding him as my sister quickly wrapped her towel around his ankles. I was so caught up in the matter; I didn't hear my mom scream. I just looked over to see her jumping in the pool and detangled myself from my cousin and ran fast as I could to join her. My mom has never been keen on swimming, so whenever she chose to jump in with us, I always capitalized on the opportunity.

I understood at that moment what people mean when they say something happened in a blur. They don't say it because they can't remember, they say it because there was too much to remember; they say it because they don't want to remember. As I watched my mother surface from the pool in drenched clothes, I observed the expression on her face and prayed that it was just distorted by the magic of the water. She looked so sad, so worried and so angry. I then looked to see what she was holding, and very slowly closed my eyes. I thought that if I didn't see anything, the moment would be frozen; that the pendulum of that second

would become weightless. And in that second, I wished that the water would change my cousin back. I wish the magic would undo itself.

My mom placed his limp body on the cement and immediately started hitting his chest. He lay unresponsive; his air had gone and I knew his time had slowed.

I don't know what convinced him to jump off his chair and swim into the deep end. I question if it was a courageous effort to avenge the fall of his older brother, or if he had chosen to brave the bottom of the pool as I had moments earlier; but whichever reason initially drew him in, he knew how to swim. I wonder now if, as he went below the water, he felt the same sensation I had felt earlier. I wonder if he believed he could breathe. I wonder if I was the one who was supposed to swim forever. And I wonder if, by taking that fateful sunken breath, he somehow saved me.

As the paramedics arrived, I once again returned to my grandfather clock. I didn't notice that a medic had stopped to comfort me, and I didn't respond when the police asked me what happened. I just sat and counted the seconds.

I solved the riddle that day, and in the years after I spent by my cousin's side in the hospital, I perfected my understanding. Time doesn't vary, but the moments you notice within it do. You can notice every moment within a second, and that it can last an hour; or you can let the moments pass unnoticed and allow that second to be nothing more than a second. You can observe anything you want in perfect detail as time slows down for you, or you can observe nothing and let time slip away.