

Shivering with Intention

By Elaine K. Howley

That's me on the right there. The short one, trudging into the frigid water next to my swimming partner, Jerome Leslie. All seven feet of him.

Now, look a little closer at the body language. See my left hand? It's all balled up, isn't it? That curled fist is where the intention I felt in my heart and mind came to rest as I calmly (on the surface, at least) walked into the ocean in Boston the second weekend of December to begin my first official "ice swim." Yelping as the cold seared my flesh would be gauche, so I clenched my fists and set my jaw. "Hello, Harbor. Are you ready for us?"



Despite what the EMT who we had hired to watch over us from shore on that drizzly, raw Saturday thought when he first arrived, this wasn't one of those Polar Bear Plunge events where participants throw themselves into and then directly out of the water and into dry clothes. No, this was far crazier than that. Jerome and I were bound and determined to swim a whole mile in the 41-degree water of Boston Harbor. Without a wetsuit. This is what one must do if one intends to complete an official ice mile and have that effort recognized by the International Ice Swimming Association, a South African organization that promotes extreme open water swimming events around the world.

We knew this wasn't going to be easy, but the power of intention was enough to propel me and Jerome out of our respective warm beds that rainy Saturday morning to endure potentially lethal water temperatures. We had trained well, getting and staying in the water for as long as possible two times a week all fall as the mercury slid ever downward. While the acclimation training was paramount, so was general conditioning and speed work, and we each swam in the pool with our Masters swim teams as much as possible. Frequent long-distance swimming is a way of life for us, but the addition of the severe cold was something new.

I've done my fair share of big, cold open water swims. I swam the English Channel in 2009, the same year I swam around Manhattan Island. I also swam across the Catalina Channel between Catalina Island and the mainland of Southern California in September 2008. The three swims together constitute the "Triple Crown" of open water swimming, and to date, only 67 people have joined that club.

I also spent 17 hours and 58 minutes one very long day in September 2011 swimming the length of Lake Memphremagog, a 25-mile crossing in 63-degree water that took a whole lot longer than it should have due to a heavy headwind for the first half of the race. I went looking for the lake creature, Memphre, who's rumored to live in that lake, and while I came up empty-handed on plesiosaur sightings, I learned an awful lot about myself and glowed proudly for days, bright with the victory rather than just the usual sunburn.

But that was a different afterglow from the atomic strawberry-pink I flushed upon completing my ice mile (with an additional .03 miles tacked on just for good measure) in a time of 29 minutes and 18 seconds on December 8, 2012. Not the fastest mile I've ever swum, but respectable for an ice swim. Swimmers are usually far slower in very cold water than under more rational conditions, so I actually expected the swim to take 35 to 40 minutes and was thrilled when my husband shouted from the kayak he paddled alongside me that I was at the last turn.

Since the swim, so many people have asked me, “Did it hurt?” Unequivocally, yes. It hurt like hell. The follow-up question is usually, “So, didn’t you want to get out?” Again, yes. Of course I wanted out of that fiery-cold water, so icy it felt thick between my fingers and ignited my toes with numbness in the first instant. But the sting of not trying or not pushing myself to my limit would have hurt a lot more for a lot longer, I figured, than this mile-wide spell of cold water.

The intention I had to fulfill this promise to myself, to redeem a “lost” season where I had to cancel several other big events, kept me warm. Adrenaline did the rest, and that proverbial “fire in the belly” that so many sports people rant about was present in a smoldering, determined, fist-curling kind of way. I was going to do this thing. We had taken the appropriate safety measures. Our EMT had back-up support on standby. We had a slew of wonderful volunteers assisting us, cheering for us, and willing us towards the finish. We had trained well and taken notes on how we felt after each swim:

November 23, 2012: Blotchy feet after 25 minutes at 45 degrees, full recovery in 30 minutes.

December 1, 2012: Dizziness and nausea after 16 minutes at 42 degrees, full recovery in 40 minutes with sauna

And so on. Despite the consistency with which we trained, the question remained: If we were struggling after relatively short swims in warmer water, how on earth would we survive a mile in 41 degrees? I don’t know, but somehow, impossibly, we did. The EMT couldn’t understand why we were alive and well either, though we radiated cold and shivered mightily for most of an hour after the swim. As he was checking my pulse again some 20 minutes into the rewarming process—think layers of towels, bathrobes, fuzzy hats, socks, and sleeping bags— he told me he would tell our story at his next continuing education event, “because you should be dead, but you’re not, and I don’t understand why.”

So as resolution season rages around us, blaring the virtues of deciding to be a better, fitter, faster, kinder person in 2013, remember that resolutions are the sort of thing the United Nations passes and even that esteemed organization can’t always enforce successful adherence in every case. Rather than confining yourself to a strict set of guidelines about who and what you’ll be this year, why not set an intention to push your boundaries and try something new? Pick an event to aim for, do your homework, and see where that leads you. Branch out. Go farther. Be braver. Get colder.

Intentions can do so much more than pave the road to hell. They can just as easily take you to the center of a breathtaking and exhilarating—and maybe intensely chilly— experience. And what a ride it will be.