

## High Dive

Many seemingly insignificant childhood experiences frame the way we approach trials for the rest of our lives. Although not necessarily major events, they seem epic at the time. In my eleventh summer I experienced one such moment. Of course at the time I didn't realize that my first high dive jump would have an enduring affect on future "first times" throughout my life.

As my memory drifts back to our neighborhood public pool, I hear the gleeful shouts of kids around me. "Yea, it's awesome!" "Really great!" "I'm gonna cannonball..." Their excitement is addictive and peer pressure is powerful when you're 11 so it's no surprise that although scared stiff I find myself lured into the queue under the high dive.

At the front of that line there are sixteen dreadful, slippery steps leading skyward.

I cross my arms, hugging myself, and do a little bouncy dance in place, to warm up a bit. Then I shrug my shoulders and try to look cool like the other kids. My gaze goes upward. While I feign nonchalance I'm a diligent spectator. Although I've never been on the high dive, I know the pool rule is to wait at the bottom of the ladder until the kid before you has cleared.

I wait, attentively watching as my predecessor reaches the sky-high platform. She takes a few, purposeful steps and deftly, pencil-straight, drops into the pool.

I crane my neck to see the lifeguard poised on his perch way, way up there. He's looking tan and serious with his red-cross trunks, white tank top, pith helmet, bullhorn by his side, whistle lanyard around his neck. I notice every detail because I am taking way too long to start my climb.

"Hey come on kid, get going!" "Hurry up!" "Go!" The callers behind me start taunting so I begin.

Am I ready to tackle that foreboding sixteen-step ladder? Gripping the cool, slick side rails I step onto the first narrow, metal step and the pact is sealed. I am committed to my first high dive jump.

On step two I look down at my bare feet and consider that my sweaty hands may fail me and I may slip and be injured before the possibility of my jump.

Step three: I take a deep breath. My head buzzes with echoes of young sages who have gone before me, “It’s a lot of fun once you get used to it.” “Don’t be a chicken.” “If you don’t belly flop it won’t hurt.”

Step four: A belly-flop stomach smack is only one hazard I face. Isn’t it true that I could die when I hit the water? Splat, like an egg hitting the sidewalk from a second floor window. Even if I don’t break my neck I could surely drown.

On steps five, six, and seven I chant to myself, “This will be fun. I can do this. This will be fun. I know I can do this. What’s the big deal? Little kids are doing it.”

By step eight my chant is modified to a declaration: “I am doing this for bragging rights – if I live through this I will boast about it forever.”

Nine and ten: Slowing down but I’ve never seen a kid turn back. Onward and upward.

Steps 11 and 12: My arms are struggling to pull my weight up.

Huffing and puffing on steps 13 and 14. The lifeguard is watching me and waiting.

Somehow I am on the very top step. The pool is at least 1,000 feet below. That beautiful aqua water appears deep and menacing from here. The expressions on the faces of the kids in the line below have taken on snide grimaces. I turn away in horror.

My eyes divert from way down into the depth of the water to the task directly in front of me – the diving board. It's longer than I thought. Long and narrow. My legs are wobbling. I appreciate that the board has a rough surface. The lifeguard nods as if I've been anxiously waiting for his approval. Reluctantly I begin my death march.

Tentatively I step forward with my right foot. Right, left. Counting. One. Two. Three. Four. Stop. A slight bouncing of the board. A significant pounding in my chest. One more look down.

Exhale.

Okay. Here goes. Help me God. Oh please help me God! I pinch my nose. Inhale and take that final step off the board and into space.

I remember to point my toes but then my free arm and legs fly in different directions. Airborne and crazy I free fall. Splash!

Entry! Ouch. Not graceful. I'm under. Down, down into the deepest depths of the pool – into hell itself. Tumbling, turning underwater, I open my eyes. Which side is up? Shouldn't I be surfacing? Lungs don't fail me.

Magically, somehow I finally emerge. I'm alive.

With coughs, kicks and frantic paddling I make it poolside.

Lunging I grab the rough, wet, cement edge of the pool. I did it.

Get to the ladder. Barely enough energy left to hold on. Puffing, panting, heart thumping.

Thank you God! I'm alive. I did it! I jumped off the high dive and I'm alive.

Oh my god. Breathe. Breathe.

Wow, that was so horrible but I did it. I'm telling everyone! Everyone!

This is so great cuz I did it and I'm alive and it's not so bad and I can say I went off the high dive. And I can try again. And I'll even get better! Yes! I do the high dive! Oh my god I did it!

Years later I look back at that 11 year old who with sheer trepidation, determination, and pride did a first time awkward high dive jump on an otherwise inconsequential summer day. I concede it was not a dive, not even a pretty jump, but rather a handsome lesson learned. While the first time is the hardest it affords the courage and confidence to try again and again and again.