

Robert the Lifeguard

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The water was crystal clear, blue and beautiful, and too far away.

I was seven years old, twelve feet above the abyss, standing on the edge of the diving board. This was the last requirement to pass my Red Cross intermediate swim class. While I was paralyzed by fear, the other kids were waiting in line behind me, becoming more impatient by the minute.

Was I the first kid to ever turn around and climb back down the ladder? I assumed my rightful place at the end of the line. Embarrassment flamed through my cheeks while the other kids giggled and pointed.

One by one, each climbed the ladder and jumped. Their mothers greeted them at the gate, wrapping them in towels and approval, as they received the coveted little white card with the words “Red Cross Intermediate Swimmer”, their names written in permanent ink.

My mom was the only one left on deck as I once again climbed the ladder. Everyone else had gone home. Everyone except Robert. Robert was the lifeguard, and the young man administering the test. To me, he seemed a grown man- tall, strong, and unafraid. He was probably eighteen, tops. This compassionate young man, who should have flunked me, instead climbed the ladder with me. It was just the two of us overlooking an Olympic-sized swimming pool. He held my hand, and encouraged me to jump with him. He wasn't going to make me- but he wasn't going to let anything happen to me, either.

Jumping off that board was one of the hardest things I ever did. Although it was more than forty years ago, I can still vividly see the deep end below me, hear my heart pounding in my ears, and feel the warmth of a teenager's hand in mine as we jumped together into the clear, blue water.

As desperately as I desired to pass that class, I lacked the courage to do what needed to be done. The only thing that saved me was a bigger, stronger, totally capable friend, and my least bit of willingness to follow instruction.

And that was obedience.

A year later, I had passed the next set of tests, and proudly possessed the ultimate card, proclaiming to the world that I was a certified Red Cross swimmer. After forty-nine years of living, the only awards I still possess are the faded blue ribbons from that season, as I went on to join the swim team.

Now, from time to time, I stand at the edge of the abyss. There have been moments when I have climbed back down the ladder and taken what appeared to be my rightful place at the back of the line. Ultimately, my turn comes again. As I ascend, my heart is pounding and my hands are shaking. This time, I call my dearest friend, and the One who guards my life. I feel the warmth of Jesus' hand in mine. I tell Him that I don't have the courage to do whatever the situation calls for. He asks, “Do you trust Me?” I summon my tiniest bit of faith, hold onto His hand with all my might, and together we jump.

And that is obedience.

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