

## Web Feature

### Swimming with a Heavy Heart

By Dr. Jane Katz



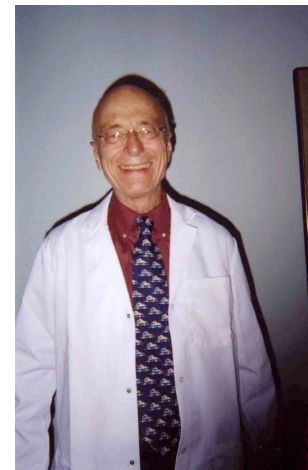
*Swimming can make you feel good, both physically and emotionally. The USMS Sports Medicine and Health Committee says swimming can also help during periods of stress, depression and grief. Committee member Jane Katz shares her perspective about the sudden loss of her husband last fall, and how swimming helps.*

In the past decade, I have come to understand what true loss is. Three of my closest loved ones have passed in the last ten years, including my mother, her sister (my aunt who was like a second mother to me), and now, my husband and best friend, Herbert Erlanger. Both my mother and aunt had been ill for a while before their passing; in a way, it prepared me for the day that would come. Of course, one is never prepared for death. Herb was so healthy and full of life. And in a split second all of that changed, and shortly thereafter, he was gone.

Although he was not well immediately after his stroke, I expected Herb to get through this. At the hospital, his personal effects were given to me. I apportioned the money in his wallet to match the time in which I expected Herb to recover; I paced myself, as I had for meets and races. I fully expected Herb would live.

In the days following Herb's death, there was a flow of thoughts that just showered into my brain. Each thought was like a little drop of water that splashed in my mind. Those drops have now become a waterfall of tears, as my other half is gone.

Herb and I shared common values in life. We came from similar backgrounds, his parents both doctors, my parents both college professors. Our relationship was unique; it was clear to us that we need not know what, but we did need to understand why. Let me explain. Herb was an attending anesthesiologist at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. I have been a competitive swimmer since I could walk, or wade, and have held my position as a health education college professor and Varsity Women's Swim Coach for almost as long. To both of us, our careers meant more than just work. We did not compete with each other in our professional lives; we were very supportive of the other's career. In fact within the past year, Herb joined me at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, to teach.



He always understood my need for the water, and that he should never interfere with it. Over the years, Herb began to accompany me to swim meets, and eventually traveled all over the world with me to different meets. He would say, "Don't push so hard, you look tired." That was the depth of his understanding of what I did, but he knew why...I live, breathe, and love the water. It heals my wounds, washes away my tears, embraces me and soothes me. To me, the water is comforting, just as Herb's presence was.

We both loved meeting new people. We loved to get together for a snack, especially with friends. Herb had a true interest and concern for each person that he met. He found the good in everything and everyone, and was truly interested in what you had to say and share. Herb really wanted to know about people. He had a child-like wonder about the world. Together, we always

laughed...we had a good time together in life. We had known each other for almost 40 years. The time we had and the years we “swam” through life together as a couple were wonderful.

When I first met Herb, he came into my life like a meteorite. When he had his stroke it was a shock; a week later, almost to the minute, he was gone. Now there is a crater in my heart. Although they say that time heals all wounds, for me, that time will need to be spent in the water. People offer condolences – they say to me that it’s good that you’re back in the water. They are right: the water comforts and supports me. I can cry in private because the Lucite shield hides the tears, and the chlorine anesthetizes some of the pain.

I can still hear Herb saying, “Keep laughing, keep swimming.” He was my cheering section in and out of the water. I always come back to the water during difficult and trying times, because the water makes things seem lighter...maybe one day my heart will be lighter too.

*Dr. Jane Katz is author of several books about water fitness and swimming, including “Swimming for Total Fitness” (1983), “Water Fitness During Your Pregnancy” (1995), and “The W.E.T. Workout” (1996). Katz has been a Masters swimmer for over three decades, and along the way earned USMS All-American rankings in seven age groups.*