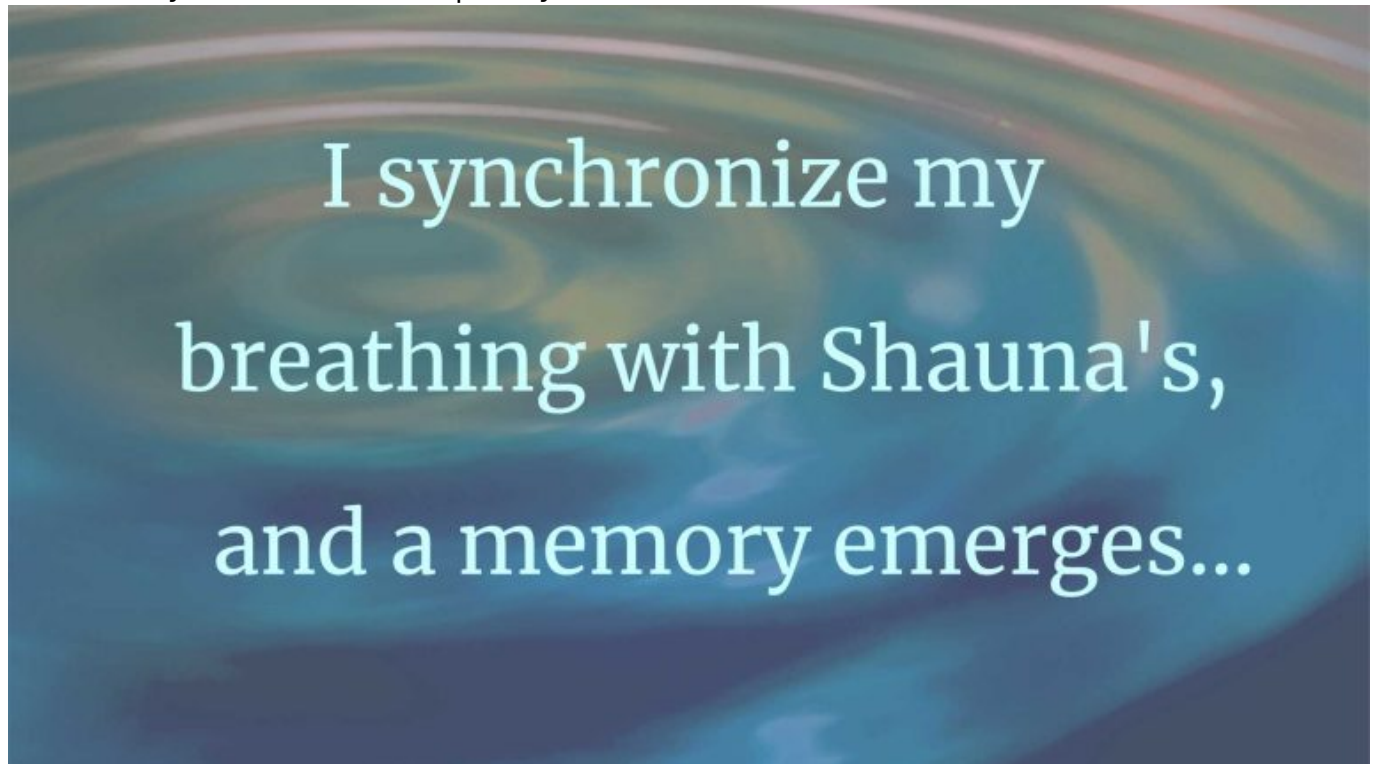


Good Job!

Category: Stories

written by Scott Janssen | July 4, 2025



Robert holds back tears as we sit at the bedside of his wife, Shauna, who is dying of congestive heart failure. I'm a hospice social worker, and we've been talking about Robert's fear of being left alone to raise their two young daughters.

"She's the one who knows how to be a good parent," he says. "I've always just followed her lead. I'll be lost when she dies."

I nod, acknowledging his pain and fear. "What would she say to you about that, Robert?"

He shakes his head, drops his face into his hands, then darts from the room. I consider following, but decide to let him have some space.

Shauna's breathing is shallow. She hasn't eaten in days and is sleeping constantly. It won't be long.

I hear the front door shut and peek out the window. Robert is headed to his workshed, where he's restoring an old Dodge Charger.

A few weeks ago, Shauna had teased him about how much time he was spending there: "You been working on that old Dodge long enough to fix it twice by now." Then she'd given him a loving smile. "I know it's where you go when you're feeling sad."

I synchronize my breathing with Shauna's and visualize her at peace as she approaches the end of her life. As our breathing locks into rhythm—breathing

in, breathing out—a memory emerges, and I’m transported back to the early 1970s.

I’m a ten-year-old kid, wearing my swim team’s crimson-colored swimsuit. It’s late, and the smell of chlorine fills the air. There’s a magical quality to the night as the crystal-clear water of a community swimming pool shimmers with bright light coming from beneath the waterline and from floodlights towering above.

The crowd packed at poolside sounds like a hurricane as everyone gets ready for the night’s last race. The score is a dead heat; this one’s for all the marbles.

I’m on pins and needles. We’re battling Candlewood—our arch enemy. If there’s one swim meet we want to win at all costs, it’s this one. We’ve *got* to beat these guys!

My races are done for the night, so the worst butterflies belong to the kids who are about to line up for glory or disappointment. It all comes down to this.

Suddenly, someone shouts my name.

“Janssen!” My coach gesticulates wildly, pointing at the sacrificial lambs moving toward the starting line. “Lane eight. Now!”

My heart pounding, I shake my head.

“I don’t swim breaststroke!” I protest loudly.

That’s an understatement. I can hold my own with the backstroke and crawl, but breaststroke? Aside from being ponderously slow, I’ve never even mastered the necessary frog kick. Technically, even if I finished in the top three, I’d be disqualified.

“You’re swimming breaststroke tonight!” he yells. “We’re down a swimmer! Lane eight!”

I hustle over to dreaded lane eight—dreaded because it’s the lane nearest the Candlewood side of the pool. Shaking my arms to try to chase away jitters, I see the “enemy” massed like an invading horde of berserkers clanging swords against shields.

I crouch for the starting gun. Despite being so close to hostile territory, and maybe because no one yet realizes that I have no business swimming breaststroke, I feel the energy of possibility. In this moment, I almost believe I’ve got a shot.

Of course, it all falls apart as soon as I hit the water. By the time I finish the first of four laps, the nearest swimmer is a quarter way into his second lap.

When I finally make the turn for the last lap, I’m the only one left in the

pool.

I plod along like a rickety rowboat taking on water. Those shimmering lights, the crystal-clear water that had seemed so magical...now they seem more like the punch line to some cosmic joke, leaving me nowhere to hide as I flail around like a disoriented tuna.

It's slow-motion humiliation.

There's a cyclical rhythm to breaststroke. One moment, my head's underwater as I reach my arms forward, then my head shoots above the water as I pull my arms back and take a breath. Up, above the water, down, below the water.

Aquatic silence, chaotic noise; breathing in, breathing out.

Each time my head surfaces, I imagine sneering Candlewooders laughing and shouting, "Somebody throw him a life preserver! I think he's going under!"

Approaching the end of the most miserable race of my life, I pull my exhausted arms back, and my head pops up. That's when I hear a voice. It's one of the Candlewood fans:

"You're doing a good job, son!"

Down, up. I hear the same voice: "You're almost there!"

Down, up. The voice is behind me now, but it's still loud and clear:

"Keep going!"

A simple act of kindness from an unexpected friend.

Shauna stirs, pulling me up from the memory. I make a quick assessment to check for indications of pain or discomfort, wondering meanwhile why that night at the pool has floated up from the deep recesses of memory.

Maybe it's to remind me of the power of kindness when working with patients like Shauna, who are, metaphorically, in the last leg of their race. Or with loved ones like Robert who are feeling the pressure, overwhelmed, worried they're going to let the team down. Maybe it's so that I can feel the gratitude, undiluted by time, for that anonymous Candlewood fan who saw me struggling and responded with compassion.

Robert is showing no signs of returning. Satisfied that Shauna is not in pain, I get up and head outside. Walking across the packed dirt path leading to his workshed, I cough and clear my throat so he'll know I'm coming.

When I step through the open door, Robert is scratching his dog, Ben, behind the ears. It looks like he's been crying.

He looks up, forcing an unconvincing smile.

"I figured you'd track me down."

"You're not hard to find," I smile. "Is it okay if I keep you and Ben company?"

He nods.

Again, I remember that supportive voice: *You're doing a good job. Almost there. Keep going.*

Now it's my turn to reach out from the sidelines.