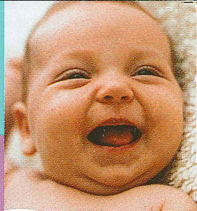


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# finding the mother gene

Reconnecting with her childhood love of swimming allowed this expectant mom to remember her mother's good side. > BY NANCY WILLIAMS

**W**HEN I DISCOVERED JUST before my 35th birthday that I was pregnant with my first child, I was euphoric. But as the days went on, panic began to boil inside me. I started sleeping 16 hours a day, awakening from naps sweaty and exhausted, my face sticking to the leather couch.

Fears zinged through my mind, like the worry that my baby's cells wouldn't divide properly if I skipped my nauseating pregnancy vitamins. More than anything, I was afraid I wouldn't be a good mother. Hoping for some reassurance, I called my own mother in Tucson, Ariz.

"I'm so tired," I said.

"Try not to think about it. It's all in your mind," she said.

"Weren't you tired when you were pregnant?" I asked.

Her girlish laugh tinkled over the telephone. "Oh, I never felt better than when I was pregnant."

I should have known not to call her. How could I have a baby? I had no model to draw on for being a good parent. My childhood wasn't the happiest, with my father sinking into his quicksand of alcoholism and my mother trespassing incessantly into the lives of my sisters and me.

After school, while she sliced green apples for a pie, my mother probed into the minutiae of my day until no secret compartment of my adolescent self remained. If I veered into dangerous territory, such as the screeching fear I felt as I boarded the junior high school bus, she would wave her paring knife. "Just sit with your friends and stop worrying," she would say dismissively.

As I lay on the couch, remembering this, panic clutched my throat. I closed my eyes and sank into a heated sleep.

Two days later, groggy and irritable, I stood on the top rung of the ladder at the local public pool. I hadn't swum laps in years, but once I began swimming, arms windmilling, legs fluttering, the freestyle stroke came back. My grogginess was gone. The cool water felt like a salve against my skin.

I started swimming laps regularly. While I swam, I thought about my childhood. Among the few happy times were the swim meets at the neighborhood country club. My mother volunteered as a timer, huddled by the starting blocks. During the meets, I had a sense of her as her own person, someone who was part of my world without intruding into it.

As time went on and my pregnancy progressed, other recollections of my mother's generosity surfaced while I swam. I remembered her teaching me to read, waiting patiently while I sounded out a word. I vowed to claim the good memories and leave the bad ones behind.

I went to the pool for the last swim of the season on Labor Day. When I reached the end of the first lap, I bowed my head and launched into a flip turn. Legs tucked, I hung suspended in the water, conscious of my baby curled inside. Then with a quick twist, I pushed my feet hard against the side of the pool, propelling my body forward. At that moment I felt ready, finally, to begin my journey as a mother. **®**

**Nancy Williams** is a writer based in Montclair, NJ, and the mother of Charlie, 6, and Gracie, 4.