



## GREEN IN THE CITY

### How a Swimming Lesson Taught Me about Sustainability

By Annette Racond

Friday nights for a single woman in New York City offer boundless opportunities. Do I splurge on another fleece pullover at the one-day-every-day Macy's sale? Or, do I spike my blood sugar with a comforting supersized Wendy's Frosty? Then, of course, I could snag the Zip Car discount for first-time users and burn a tank of gas cruising around Greenwich Village during rush hour? Hey, this is the land of consumerism. We are programmed to consume!

As it turned out, I opted for something few people would have had the courage to do on a Friday night. I went to the gym. Inside the oversized duffle bag I tote around the city is my workout attire. The urge to power lift could strike at any given moment, so I'm always prepared.

Fortunately, Equinox has locations throughout Manhattan making it easy to track down a club at a moment's notice. I passed one of the chain's locations en route to Macy's, and reminded myself of my commitment to lead a healthier and even greener lifestyle. My miniscule apartment is certainly not crying out for more clutter. Plus, hitting the gym on a Friday night does have its rewards. Equinox doesn't attract its renowned cool



crowd with their obscenely ripped abs and impossibly tiny waists on weekend eves. The place is practically empty.

Also, it's important for me to practice what I preach. I certainly have the concept of health and wellness nailed professionally. I've served as a columnist for health magazines, and have handled projects for The Kushi Institute, a prominent macrobiotics training center. *The Miami Herald* ran my humorous essay about transitioning from junk food addict to wellness journalist on the cover of its features section. The subject of living a green and sustainable lifestyle is not new to me.

When people ask me what it means to "go green," I explain that it isn't one specific practice. It's a commitment to leading a lifestyle that treats the environment gently and lovingly. This covers a lot of terrain. And, it starts with treating yourself well, too.

I walked into the hip Equinox at the Time Warner center where I was greeted on the floor

by a young trainer who introduced himself as Skip. We struck up a conversation and Skip revealed that he offered swimming lessons. He had my attention. Swimming was among my greatest fears. As a kid in summer camp, my counselor pushed my head under water with such force I was unable to lift my head. I couldn't hold my breath, and I felt like I was choking under water. By the time she loosened her grip, I was gagging as I tried to get air into my lungs.

I had no leverage. This was the preferred training method back then. As a resourceful kid, I was subsequently able to convince my doctor I was allergic to chlorine (he knew I had other allergies). He provided me with a note for my camp counselor saying I was to be excused from swimming class. That marked the end of any potential swimming career.

So, I listened intently as Skip described how he trains people of all swimming levels. I wondered what he meant by low level because I was definitely starting at the



bottom. I reluctantly shared my story with him, feeling like a boob all the while. I could practically be Skip's mother (actually, I could be his mother given our age difference), so I was a bit ashamed when I shared about my profound fear of putting my head under water.

"We've got this. No prob," he said.

Then, of course, he offered me a free introductory session to get me hooked on his services. I doubted that would be the outcome, so I reluctantly booked a session. I could always cancel, I figured. Plus, in the true spirit of salesmanship, Skip wouldn't take no for an answer.

We met the following Thursday evening by the pool. I uncovered a body suit stuffed in the back of my underwear drawer that I thought could double as a bathing suit.



Skip pitched in with a bathing cap and goggles. Aside from my previously noted fear of water, I also hated cold water. I have scalded my skin taking hot showers because I love the sensation of heat on my body. Skip, of course, convinced me to take the plunge (literally and figuratively). Yikes! Was it cold!

The first thing he did was to have me walk up and down the length of the four-foot-deep pool. Since I'm only five feet tall, I could handle that but not by much. The next feat was a big trickier. Skip told me to make a humming sound, put my face under water and blow bubbles through my nose. This sounded weird, and I didn't want to do it. But Skip persisted.

"Just try it," he said. "I'm here. Remember what I told you. We've got this."

I resorted to my own positive affirmations.

"I'm one tough broad." I said this aloud while running the New York City Marathon. It must have worked because I finished all 26.2 miles. "I can do this. No biggie."

*Looking back, I realized I didn't have to hurt the planet to embrace such a life-affirming and inspirational moment.*

Yet, I remained frozen.

I repeated my affirmations.

"I'm one tough broad. I can do this. No biggie."

I couldn't bring myself to follow Skip's instructions. Although he wasn't in the pool with me, he continued to demonstrate his humming-sound technique. Flashbacks of summer camp came rushing to the forefront of my mind.

Then, I stopped overthinking the whole thing – and took the plunge. I just did it! Isn't that what Nike suggests? Skip looked delighted after I finished my underwater bubble session. I was pleased, too.

I thought it was a wrap, but Skip reminded me that our hour-long session had only just begun.

Next, he wanted me to do the unthinkable. Hold my breath, squat under water, come up for air, and then squat again. I shuddered at the thought. My anxiety soared. What if I couldn't hold my breath and suffocated? Holding my breath in the midst of a panic



attack never ends well.

I tried using conversation as a distraction.

“How do I hold my breath? What if I can’t?  
Are there any other options?”

“Take a deep breath and hold it. That’s all  
you need to do.”

“What if I start gagging? What if I start  
breathing before coming up for air?”

“You won’t. So, take a nice deep breath and  
hold it underwater for FIVE seconds. Just  
FIVE seconds. You can do this for FIVE seconds.  
I’ll be right here counting.”

I braced myself and attempted to calm my  
mind. Loosening up instead of tensing up  
seemed like a viable strategy.

And then I took the deepest breath I possibly  
could and put my head underwater. I heard  
good ole reliable Skip counting. I tried to  
relax my mind with each successive count.

The skills I had acquired in my brief stint  
with meditation came in handy.

At the count of five, I came up for air.

Nothing could have topped the feeling of  
exhilaration I felt at that very moment.

Not a Wendy’s Frosty... another ugly  
fleece pullover ... or even driving through  
Times Square in a rented Mini Cooper. I  
had done the unimaginable. What price  
tag could I put on this experience? Plus,  
it was an achievement that wasn’t tied to  
a tangible purchase. I didn’t further clutter my  
apartment – or the environment! There  
was no harm done to our planet. Retail  
therapy was nowhere in this scenario.  
It was a moment to remember, for sure,  
but my phone died (bummer, no camera).  
It had been nearly four decades since  
summer camp and the last time I had  
ventured into a pool. I felt empowered –  
almost giddy. Skip made me feel special,  
too. His glee in witnessing my mini miracle  
felt genuine.

Looking back, I realized I didn’t have to hurt  
the planet to embrace such a life-affirming  
and inspirational moment. There wasn’t  
anything I could have purchased or consumed  
or driven that could have come even  
remotely close to the feelings of self-worth  
I gained from this victory. I had faced my  
greatest fear – and prevailed! ■

Now, that’s what I call going green.

.....  
*Annette Racond is the creator and columnist  
for RNN’s new “Green in the City” lifestyle  
initiative that explores the adventures of a  
single woman in the Big Apple (in this case,  
Green Apple) attempting to embrace a  
sustainable lifestyle. She tackles this  
subject with humor and a fresh perspective.  
Annette’s work has been published in The  
New York Times, Chicago Sun-Times, The  
Miami Herald and New York Newsday, along  
with other prominent media outlets.  
Residing in Brooklyn, New York, Annette  
is a Certified Health Coach and has  
previously served as columnist for several  
health-related publications.*

