

# Warm thoughts of a cold plunge

By Esther Baird

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BEVERLY, MASS. - “Four, three . . .” the crowd screamed.

“Wait!” I yelled. “Now? Is it now?”

I danced around like a maniac. “I didn’t hear 10! Who started counting? So it’s now?”

“Two!” The crowd surged around me. “One!”

Suddenly we were yelling and running. I was running. I was yelling. Destination? The waters of the Atlantic Ocean at Lynch Park — in February.

OK. OK. I realize that the Polar Plunge to raise money for homeless of Beverly happened almost two weeks ago. But it’s taken me that amount of time to thaw out and come to grips with the fact that I allowed myself to be seen, and photographed, in a bathing suit yet, in the middle of the Boston winter.

Don’t get me wrong. It was my idea to participate. Some crazy maniac of a friend didn’t drag me along. In fact, I *was* the crazy maniac. I was excited! Due to genetics or some improper firing of sensory neurons, I tolerate, even enjoy, brutally cold water. But when I checked the water temperature online that morning and saw that it was 34, I had a momentary pause. I wasn’t sure if my genetic tolerance extended that far. There was only one way to find out.

An hour before the plunge I layered up at home in order to raise my core body temperature. I wore long johns, sweats, socks and Texas, a pink wool hat and, a pink, goose-down bathrobe. Hey, this wasn’t a fashion contest.

Layered and warm, our whole family headed off to the beach where we joined the crowd of equally layered people, though I did seem to be the sole pink-bathrobe representative. I jumped in place to keep warm while my daughter, in a picture of incongruence, played in the sand wearing her snow coat and mittens.

It was hard to tell who was plunging and who wasn’t because we were all bundled. But when the five-minute warning was announced, the plungers and spectators began to fall out along the lines of those still comfortably clad and those noticeably not. I found myself in the latter category standing in a bikini, socks, shoes and — nothing else. In February. I felt ridiculous. Thankfully, there was no time to reconsider. The countdown began.

Return to the running and yelling scene above. A craziness came over all of us. I ran as hard as I could. Arms pumping, legs charging, I hurled myself forward and into the surf and . . .

WHOA!!! When the water reached my shins I came to a hard stop. For a long moment I stood completely still. Reason percolated up. Rationale thoughts cut through the adrenaline. This *was* crazy; these people *were* mad. But then the roar filtered back in and I managed to clamp down those silly, reasonable thoughts. I was off again screaming and yelling and then diving. Look, it's not called the Polar Prance. As such, it is my firm belief that it's not a Polar *Plunge* unless your entire body goes under. One dive beneath the water and then up.

My husband and friend, who came to watch and document it all on film, said that when I surfaced from beneath the water I hopped in place and flapped my arms while making a face that my friend said "is normally only seen when giving birth." I have no memory of that bit of awkwardness. I just had a clear awareness that I needed an exit strategy — and fast.

Back on shore, my husband wrapped me in a towel and I stood panting and laughing with amazement that it was all over. I felt great. Sure I was cold, but it was in a tingly and alive sort of way. It was a good thing too, because after a few rounds of, "That was crazy," and, "You should have seen your face," it was time to walk to our car at the far end of the parking lot. And, still standing in my wet suit with only my towel around me, Mommy the Cold Water Adventurer became just Mommy again. My husband pushed our baby in the stroller and I attended to the sand monster that was our 3-year-old.

Now that it's all over and I'm properly thawed with no embarrassing bathing suit situations in my near future, I'm already excited for next year's plunge and hope that more of you will join us. You don't even have to have great genetic tolerance, though I think it can only help if you have your own pink bathrobe.

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