Pools: fun, health, the aquatic ape, and us

In modern times, humanity’s affinity for the water has resulted in the proliferation of swimming pools — recreational, competitive, and therapeutic. There are an estimated 10 million swimming pools in the United States.

Why do we love pools so much? Paddling around pools is more than fun. There are healthful benefits as well. Immerse yourself in cool, clear water and you can feel the stress flowing out of your body. Less stress could help you lower your blood pressure, and slow your heart rate. Sufferers of ailments such as arthritis will be instantly soothed by a dip into an inviting, warm pool. Those with injuries in need of rehabilitation can improve their range of movement and muscular strength doing exercises in the pool.

Water itself is a life-giving substance. The urge to plunge in — to cleanse, to cool, to quench your thirst, and to play — that we feel when we see a blue, sparkling, clear pool harkens back to our primordial past. For early mankind, a water source was life-sustaining — supporting crops, livestock, and people.

A spring was a meeting place where the ancients came to offer votives to their gods. Over 4,000 years ago, the people of the Indus valley city, Mohenjo Daro, used their great bath for cleansing, or perhaps some purification ritual similar to the Jewish practice of mikveh, the Christian custom of baptism, and the Muslim ritual ablution called ghusl. The spiritual aspects of the life-giving spring permeate our consciousness — even for those of us who do not count ourselves as religious, per se.

In modern times, we still use pools for sacred purposes, yet future archeologists and anthropologists will note that the ubiquitous backyard pool is a source of relaxation, exercise, and just plain fun.

The ancient origins of humanity’s tie to the water go back even further than the dawn of civilization to the beginning of life itself when the first land-dwelling creature made its way out of the primordial ocean. Some theorists have posited the “aquatic ape” hypothesis: proto-humans took to the water to escape predators. This is why modern man evolved as a hairless ape — hairless except for the hair on his or her head. The scenario would go something like this: after being chased into the surf, river, or lake by a predator, the infant humanoid would grasp onto its mother by gripping her hair. If you have ever taken a young child who has a fear of the water into a pool, you might have had the experience of having the hair on your head used in just such a way.

The next time you are frolicking in your family’s pool — playing Marco Polo or demonstrating your cannonball or jackknife technique — remember the healthful spring, the ancients in their great bath, and the aquatic ape.