

the kingdom of heaven is the YMCA

young(ish) man

Our family recently joined the local YMCA. Shocker, I know, with a title like the one you just read, but bare with me. It may not seem like much, but pledging membership to a health and wellness organization is a momentous feat for our family.

A few things to note about David and myself:

1) Neither of us have an iota of athleticism in our veins. We were both swimmers as adolescents—a good sport to join if coordination is a struggle. While I had a decent dive, speed was never my forte (to be honest, neither was endurance). I could rock a 50 meter freestyle and my breaststroke was powerful, but rarely did I win a race. David on the other hand has “fond” memories of his swim coaches trying to drown the team after yet another meet defeat. I’m pretty sure he quit shortly thereafter.

Athletes we are not.

2) David and I are short of stature and terribly right brained. We’d rather discuss books than basketball and “gym bros” intimidate us both. So staying away from the gym is something at which we have always excelled.

3) I have tricky ankles and David has bad knees. I'm an out-of-shape cardiac patient and he throws up if he exerts himself too much (sorry honey—it's for the story). For years we've been telling ourselves to stay in our lane. After all, we're a pair of pseudo-artist/intellectuals who have no business bench pressing anything other than a laptop.



barefoot, in his pajamas, at the mud kitchen, “cooking” up a storm at 7AM

pick yourself off the ground

Sam, on the other hand, is the most kinetic child on the planet.

He wakes up each morning ready to play and starts throwing punches if he hasn't had enough physical sensory

stimuli by 8:00AM. Since it's summer, it has been a God-send to be able to send Sam with David across the street to water our out-of-town neighbors' garden, as well as our own, while I attempt to become vertical enough to scramble eggs. Sam touches grass and I get five minutes before our living room turns into a UFC fight.

By 9:00AM when David starts work, the kid is *still* ready to enter the octagon, even after heavy work, breakfast, and some one-on-one play. There's no stopping him. We often say that he's a thoroughbred, and if you know anything about thoroughbred horses, it's that you have to exercise them or they go completely insane.

We have discussed ad infinitum that Sam was going to turn us into more active people. We just weren't sure how. But as David drove home a week ago, he realized that a solution could be just five minutes from our home.

it's fun to stay at the...

Do you realize how close we live to the Y? They have an indoor pool, a gym, a basketball court—they even have childcare! Do you think this could be a good solution to a lot of our problems?

David was making sense, as per usual, but as two people with real gym phobias and a lack of any real athleticism, this proposition still sounded a little idealistic. I was sure that the only reason our family would actually enjoy the Y would be for the pool, and how often could we possibly use it? Would we ever get to work out sans Sam? Would Sam enjoy the childcare? Would he be overwhelmed by the pool and all its sounds, children, and the muggy chlorinated smell? Would this be a gigantic waste of what little money we had?

But in this case, I was (am) a BIG fan of being wrong.

After hesitations and reservations, I gave David my blessing to sign us up. Here's what has happened in the ONE WEEK we have been members:

- David, who naturally rises with the sun every morning, has been to the gym five out of seven days this week. He works out, comes home and showers, does a devotional, and is ready for the day by the time Sam and I wake up (around 6:30AM).
- Yes, the pool smells crazy and it's loud and Sam does. not. care. He's obsessed with the water, the kid's slide, and swimming at the Y has become his favorite "after quiet time" afternoon activity.
- Sam also LOVES the childcare. Read that again: he *loves* it. Recently, I asked him if he'd rather go to the Y's childcare while I worked out or go to a splash pad, and he chose the Y. I have worked out independently four times and barely know what to do with myself. The endorphins feel like sinner's salvation and I am "good sore" for the first time in years (I'm also a little "bad sore" from going too hard—send help).
- We have gone to the pool a couple of times as a family and I have watched as Sam's little love tank gets filled to the brim. Nothing brings me closer to heaven than seeing my child living his best life alongside my husband.

Finally, we found something we all love and can do together YEAR ROUND. It may not seem like a big thing to anyone else, but it is to us. And the miracles continue.

put your pride on the shelf

The gym phobia was still there.

Despite wanting (needing) to lose weight, I couldn't help but look around the gym and instantly compare myself to others, no matter where they were on their health journey. It's partially because I'm a female who was body shamed as early as nine years old, and partly from my own insecurities and hang ups, but here I was: in my 15 year old Coldplay t-shirt and bike shorts, no makeup, a messy braid with oversize "don't talk to me" headphones swallowing my head whole. Ready for something.

I looked around and took a deep breath.

The room was the very definition of diverse. Every shape, every age, every color was scattered across the room, lifting and running and rowing and sweating.

There was a guy with sleeve tattoos, pausing in between sets to find the next right song on his playlist, wearing a t-shirt that read "Sam's raw bar, VA Beach". I wanted to ask him if he thought that place was still in business so I could call and get a shirt mailed to me for my Sam.

There was the elderly lady sitting on her walker seat next to her husband with a book, as he pulled away at a rowing machine. The two would exchange a word from time to time, tenderness oozing from the intent gazes they shared.

There was the lady with her tie die Gonzaga t-shirt and children's unicorn water bottle, with headphones not unlike my own. She looked tired but intent, and her breathes were steady and focused. I wondered if maybe my face looked a bit like hers right now—tired and intent.

We would glance at one another as we passed machines, wiping down handlebars and seats, making slow circuits until we felt too fatigued to continue. There were a few "gym bros" and

the occasional treadmill sprinter who looked like they were training for the 2024 Olympic team, but for the most part, it was just us. The rusty, crusty, tired, and intent, in our old t-shirts and shorts, attempting to push against our American diet and stressful lives.

Everyone looked familiar to me, but they were all strangers, as I was to them.

It's not as though my body issues evaporated into thin air, but in looking around and seeing every sort of person in the same room doing the same things, I also saw the kingdom of heaven. My reasons for working out had changed over the years. Yes, I wanted to change my body composition, but I was pretty certain that if I didn't start receiving positive dopamine hits on a regular basis I would crumple up and blow away on the next strong wind. I saw similar stories in that gym. Helplessness and hope and anxiety and strength and glorious humanity, doing something that we all knew would bring us a little bit closer to a more glorified existence.

So there we were, all on common ground. Battling with what we had for what we hoped for. Picking up swords and shields and charging headlong into battle. I saw soldiers in that room, and not a gym rat in site. In a place where I had told myself that I didn't belong, I finally felt completely at home.

It was glorious.