

The Therapy Pool (2007)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner, WLRH Radio Huntsville, AL USA

If you want something to help you realize how fortunate you are -- or blessed — you need to hang out at a therapy pool. I've done this for the past five years, since having a total hip replacement; I was assigned to aqua-therapy as part of rehab; since then I have continued my visits about three times a week for some stretching and soaking, to keep that titanium and plastic joint limber.

All sorts of people come to soak in the lovely 90-degree water -- all ages and stages of life, and all sorts of bodily configurations, which are evident because you have to show up in your swim suit. There are people with back pain or arthritis, those recovering from strokes, or accidents — people with that vexing stuff called fibromyalgia, or with post-polio syndrome. Some are wheeled down the ramp in wheel-chairs built for immersion.

Last week there was a class for some really little kids from the cerebral palsy center, each with a parent. Most were about two -- some profoundly affected, others able to splash about and laugh.

For most of those who come to the pool, they're there because of no moral flaw or failure, just "the luck of the draw."

There are a couple of ALS guys, young men, in their thirties -- whom I've seen in gradual, inevitable loss of their abilities over a year or so of that awful stuff, first named for that golden Yankee first baseman, Lou Gehrig -- "the luckiest man on the face of the earth," he said at his retirement. One guy was there last week -- it takes two attendants to care for him, plus wonderful Ande, the woman who's proprietor of the place and an incredibly skilled therapist; they wheel him down into the water, totally unresponsive (so far as one can tell) -- they put floats under limp arms and knees, put his breathing pump in a plastic bin that floats beside him, then move his unresisting arms and legs back and forth as he lies there, eyes closed and silent. "Push!" Ande says to him. "Pull."

I finished my routine and walked over to where he was propped up with the lovely warm jet pulsing on the back of his neck. I called him by name, and said, "Good morning! -- you're one of my heroes!" and then I started up the

incline to the stairs. One of his attendants called after me, "He gave you a 'thumbs-up!'" That's all he can do.

Lou Gehrig was something else, but he was somewhat mistaken. He wasn't the luckiest guy on the face of the earth; I am.