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How to swim with sharks: a perspective on Voltaire Cousteau's primer

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by University College Cork user
on 12 February 2018

Voltaire Cousteau's primer on how to swim with sharks first appeared forty five years ago and stands alone, timeless.[1] At once quirky, yet clear, concise, clever; it continues to raise a smile. Swimming with sharks is not, of course, a required pastime or needed for most successful careers. It is, however, a valuable survival skill, particularly for those with ambition to explore the privileges that a life in medicine can offer. Medicine is a sea of opportunities, which encompass and transcend healthcare, science, education, leadership and entrepreneurship. In such waters, encounters with sharks are common. William Osler likened the study of medicine without books to sailing in uncharted sea, while studying without patients as not to go to sea at all.[2] Similarly, Cousteau warned that books cannot substitute for practice when learning how to swim with sharks. Having abided by his guidance, I offer a survivor's comments in grateful tribute to Cousteau.

Before entering the water, it is important that you know exactly what you want because success, at least survival, is possible with adherence to Cousteau's rules. Be sure that you want to swim *with* and not *like* sharks. Don't learn from a shark. As with other forms of endeavour, persistence is important for success. Remember that humans tend to overestimate what can be achieved in the short-term but underestimate what can be achieved on the longer-term. Since we don't know how sharks think about the future, stick with the human approach.

Cousteau teaches that we should always assume the waters are shark-infested. However, there are fewer sharks in the water now than in Cousteau's time. Moreover, some sharks are easy to swim with and it is a rare shark that does not have some admirable features, but nose dives and summersaults among the sharks are not advisable. Attempts to emulate sharks generally fail to win respect from other swimmers, including the sharks. While Cousteau rightly warned students to assume that all unidentified fish are sharks, it is noteworthy that not all swimmers who look like sharks are actually sharks. Some of them are like us and we can form alliances with these swimmers.

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Don't try to be the head shark or even the deputy head before you can show that you are as good a swimmer or better than the other sharks. And then, don't become a shark. In other words, don't assume a leadership position before you are confident in your own achievements. As a leader, your responsibility is to those around you, not self-promotion or cover for personal deficiencies.

Cousteau's rules for survival have stood the test of time, but one rule (*do not bleed*) may need revision for certain enthusiastic swimmers. While the intent is to avoid provoking a more aggressive attack, bloodless lacerations are uncommon and bleeding is seldom under the control of the swimmer, regardless of experience. For those who bleed easily, adopt an alternative: hide it! Get out of the water until you heal. This is actually consistent with Cousteau's recommendation on what to do if someone else is bleeding.

Remember, there will be difficult days. When common sense and logic don't prevail, and you can't convince the sharks to change, you still have to live to fight another day. Stay alive, survive for a better day. As Cousteau reminds us, swimmers who fail to accept this simple truth are identifiable by their missing limbs.

To swim with grace, you need to protect your space. Don't try to appease a shark. Show your mettle, never give an inch. If necessary, dispatch the recommended short sharp rebuke, which in shark-speak is a blow to the nose. Cousteau is emphatic on this point and dedicates two rules (*counter any aggression promptly*) to avoid misunderstandings and to ensure that the sharks know that you won't tolerate any fishy business (*use anticipatory retaliation*). Bullies usually lack the courage to persist if tackled promptly, and will often retreat a line of least resistance.

Learn shark language but don't try to speak it yourself. You can't reason with a shark. The notion that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger doesn't apply to swimming with sharks. Judge sharks by their actions not by their sounds. Shark sounds may distract.

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Shark body language or non-verbal cues reveal more about their intentions. Be vigilant, keep your distance, and never turn your back to a shark.

Semper Plangere. That means *always complain,* but the sharks won't know what it means because they have no word for it in shark language. Keep complaining to the sharks and about the sharks - not because you will ever change the sharks but because you don't wish become like the sharks.

Finally, when you have mastered how to swim with the sharks, get out of the water and don't become a shark. Be yourself, and if you know anyone else who needs to swim with sharks, help them. Begin with Cousteau.

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