

living

Water Flows to Us

Whether you're thermal bathing at a spa, walking in the rain, or cold plunging in your backyard, our writer—author of a new novel set entirely underwater—explores why we're all drawn, in the most primal of ways, to water

By James Sturz

My eyes are closed, and I'm floating in water nearly the temperature of my skin, surrounded by ferns, orchids, bromeliads, and an explosion of hibiscus. The only sounds are the birds overhead and the soft rustling of leaves, plus a sloped waterfall to one side, feeding the pool, which in some deeply meditative way is also feeding me.

I've come to this private spa hale, 1,800 feet high up on the volcanic island of Lanai, on the 90,000-acre Hawaiian island Larry Ellison bought nearly all of in 2012, to what his Sensei Lāna'i, A Four

Seasons Resort, simply calls "Aquatic Bodywork." But it's more like underwater shiatsu, ballet, yoga, stretching, integrative therapy, and rebirth rolled into one.

With the help of a few water wings wrapped around my thighs and calves, Israeli masseur Liran Ozeri manipulates, stretches, cradles, and gently contorts me. Before we begin, he asks how comfortable I am in the water, and when I answer that I've just written a book, *Underjungle*, that's set entirely underwater, he smiles and simply says, "Okay."



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Now as we move through the water,

my mind wanders like a lone palm frond on the surface, and then suddenly my spine realigns with a muted and liberating *cra-ack*. I feel my torso spin, as my limbs trail behind me like a rag doll’s, until I start thinking I’m more like an undulating fish. When Liran signals me with a light tap, I take a slow and deep breath, and then just as slowly he turns me face down, for a few seconds at first, but a little longer each time, gauging how comfortable I am. I’ve also told him that I’m a free diver and used to holding my breath—I’d have timed competitions with my dad while growing up in a New York apartment, where I pretended the living-room shag carpet was finger coral and the views from our 12th-story windows were of a deep coral wall—and when the session is over Liran tells me I was underwater for 90 seconds at a time, although those stretches felt effortless and timeless, as my mind kept wandering and my body felt like it was dissolving in water.

At its heart, the massage is “Watsu,” water-based Zen shiatsu created in 1980 at Harbin Hot Springs, outside Napa; and then combined with “WaterDance,” a method developed independently in Switzerland, incorporating sinuous inversions, rolls, and aikido; plus “Healing Dance”—Watsu further elaborated by a ballet choreographer, and then tweaked by Liran to incorporate Tibetan singing bowls that when struck on the surface generated vibrations and sounds that penetrated my body and made a smile stretch across my face.

“I don’t have an agenda or a goal,” he tells me afterward, as I sip tea and nibble on mango, “except to reach a state where we can set aside shame or self-consciousness, which brings clarity, bliss, and unconditional love for yourself and for others, and for anything you want to bring into your life.” Then he says, “I treated a 48-year-old woman on her birthday, and she told me she almost drowned as an 8-year-old during our intake. But I had the intuition to ask if she wanted to try the underwater part, and her eyes lit up. So we did it, and afterward she told me, ‘Thank you for helping to heal my relationship with water,’ and she was crying. The next day, she went to the beach and swam for the first time in 40 years.”

I've been a water person for as long as I can remember.

I was certified in scuba diving one summer in college three and a half decades ago in upstate New York (we saw trout), but the process of writing my book during the pandemic was one of thinking about water, especially when so much of the world was sealed off. Aquatic Bodywork isn't just emotional; it promotes deep relaxation by enhancing the parasympathetic nervous system. It also claims to treat neuromuscular injuries, chronic pain, pregnancy discomfort, and to improve healing, immune response, and sleep patterns.

We all have emotional, physical, and psychological connections to the water. Being near water calms us, and many of us seek water therapies in our spas and our homes. Water supports us and takes our weight, and said just that simply, we understand it is beautiful. The ocean covers more than 70 percent of our planet, with only some 5 percent of it mapped. *Underjungle* focuses on imaginary creatures who live deep in the ocean and embrace the life that the water and currents bring them, whether it's nourishment, minerals, mates, songs, or ideas. On land, in our actual cities and towns, we grow up being told to drink eight glasses of water each day. But while the most important water cure is simply to stay hydrated, it hardly ends there.

We spend the first nine months of life immersed in an aqueous environment, so hydrotherapies bring us back to our origins. They bring us life. We can relax in the water in ways that we never could on land. And because we're buoyed by water, it's the perfect medium for exercise if you have physical limitations. But there's more to it than that. Jacques Cousteau once said, "From birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free." You can move in any direction in the water. Up and down, and to any side. But you can also move deeper into yourself.

It's not strange that I thought of my father when I was with Liran. Water brings memories rushing back. As Wallace J. Nichols writes in his best-selling book *Blue Mind*, "Some of the strongest recollections people can have around water are swimming alongside family. The dad who holds his arms out to you as you jump into the pool for the first time. The mom who sits with you on the beach in the shallow water, laughing with you as the waves rush around the two of you."

Ideas lose their hard edges in water and merge together, before fluttering away like fish. Thought becomes directionless, and being in the water is relaxing because no one enters it expecting to solve a problem (not even Archimedes, whose eureka moment was figuring out how density worked in the bath). One of the pleasures of water is that its appearance is fairly consistent, but with just enough

variation—waves, current, froth, trickles, streams, light—that it remains simultaneously intriguing and calming, a mix of comfort and surprise. Water distracts us, but it also mesmerizes us.

Likewise, water sounds are soothing because they aren't high-frequency or harsh, and they're rarely loud (waterfalls and rain are staples of most white noise machines). But since we spend those first nine months hearing sounds through amniotic fluid—whether they're our mother's heartbeats or breaths, or ones outside her body—it may be that water sounds transport us, cognitively, to a time when we were most protected and trouble-free.

Every morning, I splash water onto my face. I suspect you do that, too. But I don't think it's just to wake up or wash my skin, as I study myself in the mirror, but to return myself to that watery world. I wake up and need it. When water engulfs us, it's a moment of grace. And it's a return to nature—as well as to an idea of a more natural us. That itself is immersion.

Nearly 70 years ago, Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote *Gift from the Sea* while vacationing on Florida's Captiva Island. She understood that life by the sea was one of simplicity. When we shed our clothes and the trappings of life, this simplification soaks through to our interior selves. In the water, we are blissfully alone, but we are also part of something bigger. We are part of the world that envelops the planet, and that means we're at one with all the ocean and its life. Even the sharks.

"Water gives me a sense of buoyancy and calm that has everything to do with being taken out of the everyday," says Bonnie Tsui, who wrote *Why We Swim*. "I love the flow of swimming and surfing, but even just floating in the ocean has its own cosmic rhythm—it's listening to something out of time and being part of something bigger." And because we let ourselves drift, this leads to creativity, which might be why we get our best ideas in the shower.

None of this requires an ocean. There are lakes, pools, rivers, fountains, tubs, steam rooms, and showers. There's also the rain, and a nearly inexhaustible line of rain showers you can install in your bathroom. (The outdoor ones at the Sensei spa hales are 3 feet by 3 feet, while inside there's also a steam shower, infrared sauna, and deep-soaking Ofuro tub, so that each of them is an elegant aquatic spa playground.)

We have been drawn to these cures since as far back as anyone can remember, and water rituals play a role in most religions, from baptisms and mikvahs to baths in the Ganges. We know what our bodies need, and this always starts with water. Nichols tells me he offers "bluescriptions," recommendations of water experiences anyone can have. ("They have limited side effects and a low chance of addiction," he riffs.) Once water was the world's first mirror, so it probably played a strong role in the development of consciousness. We know ancient Egyptians bathed daily, adding essential oils, and that Romans built imperial *thermae* and public *balneae*, not just with a caldarium and frigidarium but a tepidarium to visit in between.

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Back in 1999,

when we all thought we were entering a new world, I visited Spa, Belgium, whose natural springs gave us the word, and where I was hosed down delightfully with eau minerale like a dirty Renault (curiously, the town's other landmark is a laundry museum). In Bhutan, I've soaked in a bath in the middle of a potato field, where hard woods heated stones just past my feet to 750 degrees F. In Japan, I've unwound in an onsen in a mountainous oak forest, while snow monkeys scampered out of reach. In Barbados, I've lingered in the ocean off the finest white sand, which everyone there uniformly calls a "sea bath." In Bora Bora, I've had breakfast brought to our bungalow by outrigger canoe, and then served on a glass-top table over a fish-filled lagoon (it also turns out that watching a moray eel hunt and twist beneath you as your own spine is manipulated in a spa with a similar view is a surprisingly agreeable Polynesian ritual). In Hawaii, I've paddled one of those canoes myself just before dawn, so that we could watch the sun rise over a volcano, and I've quenched my thirst afterward with deep-ocean water drawn from 3,000 feet beneath the surface before being desalinated and bottled, which its producers claim to be the purest water that exists, since no bacteria could survive there. And in Utah, I've scuba dived in geothermal springs that were 100 degrees F in the winter and resembled green tea, except for the resident trumpet snails and mollies, some of which had accidentally boiled themselves alive. When I exited the water, I felt my pink skin glowing, as if I'd left a mineral bath. This is the short list. But all of these experiences are part of me now. We drink them in.

Every year it seems there's a new water therapy. Lincoln, California-based Plunge makes indoor/outdoor tubs that chill to 39 degrees F with the press of a button, promising elevated energy and focus, better muscle recovery, immune support, reduced inflammation and stress, and also better hair. The company also makes a new Plunge Sauna, with flip-up seating, so you can use it for hot yoga or with a stationary bike. The Kohler Waters Spa, in Kohler, Wisconsin, has a Fire and Ice treatment where peppermint-infused ice orbs are held to your skin before a 104-degree F Vichy shower melts them. You can also test Kohler's advanced tubs there before installing them at home. This includes its Stillness bath, which adds light, fog, and a choice of aromas; its RiverBath, with simulated river currents; and its VibrAcoustic bath, with hidden speakers that emit sound waves—not so different from Liran's singing bowls, except that you get to use your own playlist. And the Lodge at Woodloch, in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains, even has a SnowRoom, with actual snow that might temporarily fool you into thinking you're in a CGI forest. You can order your own from TechnoAlpin, headquartered in Italy's Dolomites, and install it across from your sauna. Accessories include a fragrance system, snow shovel, ice scraper, and bucket. Or you can just pour yourself a glass of water and take a sip.

In *Underjungle*, my sea creatures live in a world of surges and saturation, with the hold of the water around them and circulating within them. It is reanimation. They can't imagine life that would exist only on land, with its dryness, stillness, and empty spaces. In truth, none of us can. ◉