

Sessions in the Sea

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Aquatic sessions in bodies of natural water are quite different from those in pools. Givers and receivers alike experience distinct advantages as well as some drawbacks.

I confess, I've never worked outside of a pool except to float a friend for a few minutes on a beach in São Sebastian, Brazil. My first exposure to the idea was in 1994 in Australia when I met Sandy who had studied with Elaine Marie and had given sessions at Monkey Mia, a beach on the southwestern coast famous for its dolphins. According to her, they would sometimes participate in sessions with the occasional friendly nudge and chirping greeting. This same practitioner had also worked in the Johnson River there, amidst the local crocodiles. ("Yes, we will be sharing the space with a few reptilian carnivores, but no worries, they only reach a length of a meter and a half and have never bitten anyone--yet!")

As great as these experiences sounded to me, this article was inspired on another continent and a decade later. It was after a late Shabat dinner in July of 2004. I am sitting with Suzi and Ayal Shifron, my friends and organizers in Israel, in their apartment in Old Jaffa. The city has not quite wound down; Arab music wafts through the evening air like perfume. The conversation turns to our passion, the water work. They start telling me about giving sessions in the sea up and down the Israeli coast, from south of Tel Aviv to up near the Lebanese border. (Don't make the mistake of referring to the Mediterranean as an ocean, by the way. Israelis will correct you every time, "No, it is a sea, the Mediterranean Sea, *nachon*?")

Batyam is a colorful town just south of Jaffa where you can spot Russian mafia types in their black t-shirts sipping espressos in chic cafés. Just down the cliffs from the happenin' seaside avenue is a natural seawater pool, the best in the world, according to Ayal. Created by a rock jetty that keeps out the biggest waves, it extends 200 meters in length and 40 meters in width. Ayal and Suzi recall some "hardcore" sessions they did in those still waters with epileptic clients and children with genetic diseases. They remember that the onlookers were particularly accepting of what they witnessed.

The Achziv Festival takes place at the Club Med in the North, just a few kilometers south of Rosh Hanikra. Ayal recounts how he was one of five aquatic bodyworkers giving longer sessions of forty minutes or so. The seawater was not so warm, so they provided wetsuits. Unexpectedly, the

cold had a therapeutic effect, allowing many feelings to surface. Ayal also thinks that receiving a session as part of such a festival, in an atmosphere of love and unity, tended to amplify their feelings. People were often unable to speak afterwards.

The beach closest to home where Suzi and Ayal work the most is the Hilton Beach in Tel Aviv, just north of the Marina where their sailboat is moored. A breakwater with its crossbar parallel to the shore creates two sheltered areas suitable for water sessions. Arriving on the beach with a cooler full of water and fruit, Suzi and Ayal set up a sun umbrella. They have along a placard displaying pictures of trainings and sessions; their brochure is available for passersby. The work attracts the attention of people on the beach, who sometimes ask questions, making it more of a community phenomenon. The beach is the waiting room; it doesn't matter if you are early or late, there is no rushing. Among their clients were the blind, the elderly and arthritic patients. Suzi recalls one woman, who after her session, remained on the beach the entire day, sitting with her feet in the water until evening.

Paradoxically, because people's fear of water is greater in the sea than in a pool, it makes a better place to learn swimming. Suzi describes how she integrates swim lessons for water phobic people with aquatic bodywork sessions, giving the session first and then the swim instruction, or vice versa. The sea is unpredictable, always changing, serving, in effect, as an interactive learning environment constantly offering up lessons. Once a student learns how to deal with the waves and currents without wasting energy, a pool is tame by comparison. The sea is not just challenge, however; the freedom and the options for playing go far beyond those available in a pool.

As for the aquatic techniques, *Watsu* needs calm waters that do not wash over the face. Suzi says the sea is better for *WaterDance* where most of the time is spent submerged. The water is alive and moving; receivers feel as if they travel for kilometers. "You feel the infinity." And there really is a lot of space--you can travel a *Waterdance* Foot Snake fifty meters down the beach. On the other hand, she sometimes stands still and lets the current do the work, releasing the body and watching it be carried away. Ninety percent of her clients want to keep receiving in the sea; some never go back to pools.

Ayal enumerates for me the advantages of working in the sea. First of all, mineral-rich seawater is so alive in comparison to chlorinated pool water. It is truly rejuvenating; in the first fifteen minutes he can see the vitality returning to exhausted receivers. Because the water is constantly moving, there is no choice but to invent new moves that go with the waves and

currents, which receivers enjoy. Furthermore, there are distinct layers with different temperatures, heightening the sensory experience. And to make things simpler, you usually don't have to put floats on receivers on account of the increased salinity buoying up the body.

There are other advantages not related directly to the water. In the *WaterDance* move, Down Deep, as the receiver lays back on the bottom, she feels not a hard, dead surface like in a pool, but rather sand that is soft and alive. And with a pair of goggles, receivers can see the fish and the light refracting through the moving water.

In another conversation a few days later with 29 year old Israeli, Inbal Gutman, she tells me how she had always wanted to work with children in the sea. She calls it "the real water". She tells me how receivers delight in the different temperature currents, the sounds, the sunlight, the waves. Inbal had the opportunity to work in the Red Sea, which is normally cold on account of having a depth of up to nine kilometers. She, however, was giving sessions in a sandy-bottomed lagoon in the Sinai that was shallow and therefore warmer. Inbal says she prefers to work in the sea now. She reminds me that although she has a university degree in hydrotherapy, you have to feel and practice to know how to work with people--it is not just schooling.

I got to talk to Erez Beatus about this subject, too. He is a champion free diver, a hydrotherapist and one of Israel's outstanding aquatic bodyworkers. He told me of sessions he had given in Thailand. For Erez, sessions in seawater are better; they have a stronger energy. People come with a different approach: going to the ocean is for fun. They are ready to lie back and let go. And it is a natural experience replete with joy and freedom--you can snake and dolphin forever in the limitless space. Receivers hear bird sounds, cicadas, the squeaks and cracks of fishes, and the sound of pebbles and sand moving. Sessions are necessarily shorter in 30° C. water and small waves have a habit of mischievously washing over the receiver's face. The sun can be a problem, too, so early morning or before sunset are good times to schedule. Less flotation is required and the body floats more evenly in seawater, making "Zen" surfacings (when one simply releases a submerged receiver and lets him float up on his own) more controllable and predictable. That same enhanced buoyancy causes givers to float up and lose control, however. But when that's not happening, the sandy bottom gives a good leverage.

Let's take an honest look at the negatives of working in natural bodies of water...

1) Water Temperature

When temperatures fall below the temperature of the skin clients cease to feel warm and cannot relax easily. (Pregnant women would be an exception, tolerating significantly lower temperatures.) Prenatal states triggered by the warm water association with amniotic fluid are less likely to occur with cooler temperatures. Ayal tells me that in June the water temperature of the Mediterranean off Tel Aviv reaches 28° C., rising to 29° C. in July, peaking at 32° C. in August and by September dropping to 25° C. One hardy client of his receives sessions during this entire period, the colder months serving as a sort of hydrotherapy to strengthen his immune system. Most of their clients prefer to receive from end of July into the beginning of September.

2) Waves

As mentioned earlier, even small waves washing over the face disrupt the "meditation into the self" and cause protective holding in the neck muscles. This holds true more so for surface techniques, such as *Watsu*, than for underwater work where the nose is safely sealed with a clip and much time is spent below the surface. Larger waves levitate both giver and receiver and may wrest the receiver from the giver's arms. On the beaches of Tel Aviv winds from the north and south generate waves that even breakwaters cannot entirely cancel out.

3) Water quality

Days when the sea is polluted from sewage are unsuitable for water sessions. In Israel, as in other coastal locales, these conditions are announced on the radio and posted on the beaches.

4) Jellyfish

In Tel Aviv, when the rains come and the seawater heats up, jellyfish of the stinging variety come to multiply. Their presence rules out water sessions.

5) The sun

Working in direct sunlight exposes giver and receiver to the risk of sunburn and overheating. The giver can wear a broad sun hat to cast a protective shadow over the face of his receiver. Applying sunscreen beforehand would also make sense. As Erez related, sunrise and sunset are good times to avoid harsh sunlight. One of our Israeli water colleagues, Ian Passi, came up with a different solution. Working during a festival in the Sea of Galilee, he planted four stakes in the water and hung a sunshade material between them. This

contraption, possibly inspired by a Salvador Dali painting, functioned well enough on account of the lake water being calm.

Returning to that evening in Old Jaffa, Ayal finishes on a philosophic and visionary note. For him, when a wave comes and lifts both his receiver and himself off the bottom, it serves as a reminder that adapting to natural conditions beyond our control parallels the adaptations we must make to survive in the world today. The mind of the therapist opens when faced with unpredictable influences and finds creative solutions. We can, for instance, emulate the movements of marine animals in their own environment. And that little fish nibbling the back of our foot may be painful, but he reminds us that we are not alone in the world; there are other beings here, too, and we must share.

Ayal sees the sea as inclusive, a place for everybody. "It is more public than public; it is under God's eye." Like Harold Dull introducing *Watsu* to Japan and completing the circle begun there with his studies of *Zen Shiatsu*, taking aquatic sessions into the sea is returning to the source of life on this planet to heal. May we all find that healing we seek, that is there for us awaiting our readiness.

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