

## The Water Cure

While posted in London in the 1750s, Benjamin Franklin swam daily in the Thames. The cold bath was a corrective much in vogue, and the scientist, inventor, and all-around Renaissance man was an avid skinny-dipper for much of his long life. Brits at the time suffered from what one writer has called “a mess of maladies . . . fevers, digestive complaints, melancholia, nervous tics, tremors, and even stupidity were the epidemics of the day.” The new wonder drug prescribed for the nasty health effects of urban living? Cold seawater. And thus the English seaside resort was born—not for sun worshipping or frolicking, but for dunking oneself in the cold miracle cure of the ocean. It was the collective baptism of a country.

Back across the pond, water therapy became big business in nineteenth-century America. Public distrust of the medical establishment led to the fervent adoption of the water cure for everything from broken bones to typhus. There was even a hydropathic medical school, opened in New York City in 1851. By the outbreak of the Civil War, more than

two hundred water cure clinics were operating around the country, and a journal dedicated to the subject had tens of thousands of subscribers.

“Water cure patients sat in water, submerged themselves in water, stood under water as it was poured over them, wore wet compresses, wrapped themselves in dripping sheets, and ate a meager diet washed down, of course, with water,” writes one historian of the practices. It was water, water everywhere—mostly for immersion but sometimes to drink. (The prescription of eight glasses of water a day is a relic from this time.) Cold water was proclaimed the sovereign remedy for every ailment. Dunk your head in it for a fever! Sniff it for a nosebleed! Take a cold mouth-bath to cure yourself of the filthy habit of tobacco chewing and restore a healthy salivary flow!

Swimming was critical to the water cure. In the eight-volume *Hydropathic Encyclopedia*, published circa 1851, the “swimming-bath” is prescribed as “health preserving” and “hygienic” for all persons, but also as “eminently therapeutic in some forms of chronic disease.” As I flip through the encyclopedia’s five hundred plus pages, I find its exhaustive discussions of river, sponge, and wave baths to be both mind-numbing and fascinating. Whether you were weak in the lungs from tuberculosis or suffering from chronic constipation, swimming would help—to strengthen and open up the lungs, to get those lax abdominal muscles going and (ahem) move things along. Pamphlets rained down on the public prescribing saltwater swims for longevity.

Our trust in water as a cure-all goes back to the ancients. Egyptian royals bathed in water laced with essential oils, and Chinese and Japanese traditions extolled the medicinal effects of thermal springs. The Greeks went deep in their examination of every type of water therapy. Euripides wrote that “the sea restores men’s health”—with great personal gratitude, since he was allegedly cured of rabies with a near drowning in the ocean. Called the “sailors’ method,” this combination of water and asphyxia was a celebrated ancient treatment for the disease. One symptom of rabies is hydrophobia, and it was thought that a timely application of water would cure it. (Euripides notwithstanding, it did not prove to be an effective remedy.) Hippocrates and Aristotle were big fans of hot seawater baths. Romans would soak in hot water pools, then hop into the frigidarium—a bracing cold-water bath—to close the pores and leave bathers refreshed at the end of the regimen.

For most of this history of immersing our bodies in water for wellness, proponents didn’t know exactly what they were talking about when it came to why. But they knew what felt good.

KIM CHAMBERS DOESN’T know much about the murky history of the water cure, but she was desperate to recover after her injury. When she fell that day in 2007, she smacked her head on the ground and struck her leg on a big ceramic pot at the bottom of the stairs. “I have a really high pain tolerance,” she tells me, “so I just thought it was going to

be a nasty bruise.” She managed to drive to work, her leg ballooning to nearly double its normal size. At the office, she collapsed. At the hospital, surgeons sliced open her leg in two places to relieve the swelling that was destroying her nerves. She didn’t wake up until postsurgery, when her doctors reported the grim news that she might never walk again.

What does despair look like, feel like? It looks like angry red scars. It feels like shame, the urgent desire to hide a limp. It feels like desperation. It is the opposite, then, of the unfettered joy of a child swimming at the beach.

That joy is what Kim was after when she made herself go to the pool. Being a patient gets old after a while—two years of doctors’ appointments, pain meds, full-time physical therapy. On the morning she swam for the first time in San Francisco Bay, what she finally found was a glimpse of an alternate reality. “Not a lot of people have video footage of their rebirth,” Kim says. “But I do. The guys I was swimming with filmed me, this shivering, skinny, broken woman who was a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet. But I had the biggest shit-eating grin on my face that they’d ever seen.” It occurs to me that religious people who find God, of course, do have videos of their rebirth. They are born again—oftentimes in water, with a baptism.

After Kim started swimming in the cold waters of the bay, she noticed a change in her severely nerve-damaged right leg: it had more feeling in it. She had a theory that she ran by her physicians in those early days. “All the blood is sucked from your extremities to protect your organs when you get in that

cold water,” she explains, in her lilting New Zealand accent, during one of our marathon phone calls after work one evening. (When she’s not training or traveling the world for swims, she has until recently been working as a director of community engagement for Adobe, the software company.) “Couldn’t it be possible that when the blood rushes back into those extremities after you warm up again, that you’re getting a kind of oxygen therapy? That there’s a higher rate of it being flushed around your body?” Her doctors said they could see the validity in it, with oxygen circulating at a much faster rate than if Kim were sedentary or even exercising on land. The result: her nerves were regenerating at a swifter pace relative to that of the previous two years.

TO TEASE APART the tangle of truth and myth around water, I call up Dr. Hirofumi Tanaka, director of the Cardiovascular Aging Research Laboratory and professor of kinesiology at the University of Texas. He studies how our bodies move, heal, and age. By virtue of his work, and his upbringing—in the string of islands that is Japan, where learning to swim is required of all schoolchildren—Tanaka is an effusive, enthusiastic proponent of swimming for health.

Tanaka’s lab has pioneered new research on swimming’s effects on two of the biggest hallmarks of aging: high blood pressure and arthritis. “Over the last four or five years, a funky thing happened—we realized that the effects of swimming actually surpassed the magnitude of the effects of walking or cycling,” he tells me. “None of us knew that before.” Average

reduction in blood pressure after land-based exercise training is five to seven points. Swimming, he found, reduces blood pressure by an average of nine points—in the blood-pressure world, that’s significant. It also decreases arterial stiffness, a condition in which the walls of your arteries become less elastic and add strain to the heart muscle.

The pressure of water itself on your body plays a part in swimming for health. When you immerse yourself in water, it pushes blood away from the extremities and toward your heart and lungs; this temporarily elevates your blood pressure and makes your heart and lungs work harder. The process builds efficiency and endurance in the cardiovascular system, leading to lower blood pressure over time. And when you swim, the water provides gentle, all-around resistance for your muscles to work against.

There’s an element of agelessness to swimming, Tanaka says: more bodies can do this, and for longer. In Japan, a nation of old people, swimming is hugely popular. There is even a subset of Japanese manga, or comic books, dedicated to swimming. Tanaka loves to go up to the top of Tokyo Skytree—at two thousand and eighty feet, it’s the tallest tower in the world—because on a clear day you can look down and see all the swimming pools glinting on the city’s rooftops.

Swimming had always been assumed to be good treatment for arthritis, but there was no science to back it up. In 2016, Tanaka and his co-researchers published a paper that provided a definitive *yes*. “If you look at patients with

arthritis, the major issues are pain and function,” Tanaka says. “They suffer from chronic pain on a daily basis. After swimming training, the pain levels went down substantially. And even though the patients were in water, the functions we assessed on land—walking, standing from a chair—improved substantially. Swimming is the best exercise we can prescribe because it stimulates mobility—without pain—and circulation.” The swimming studies were done in cool water pools, that is, regular swimming pools, which are typically eighty degrees and below.

So Kim Chambers’s instinct was right: swimming in cool water every day boosted her vascular function—the healthy circulation of blood around the body, to the damaged parts that needed it—even more than running or cycling would have. And, perhaps most important, without the pain.

“IF I DON’T swim, the pain grows. If I’m in more pain, what will become of my life?” In an essay on living with chronic pain, the writer Melissa Hung describes a swim as a daily act of endurance. In the years since a headache has taken up permanent residence inside her skull, the pool is the place where pain leaves center stage, if only briefly. It’s where she finds momentary relief from “a body that will not behave.” Swimming hurts, but not swimming hurts more.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt suffered from polio; while in office, he had a swimming pool installed in the White House and swam for therapy several times a day. President John F. Kennedy, who endured near-constant back pain and

a life of excruciating health miseries, loved the pool so much he swam before lunch and dinner. FDR's pool remains there today, beneath what is the press pool briefing room.

*Buoyancy, floating, weightlessness. Freedom.* These are the words we use to talk about swimming. Is it a coincidence that this is also the language we use to talk about the lightness of being, the wellness of being, that we strive for in this corporeal world?

Downstairs at the Dolphin Club, between the boathouse and the front stairway entrance, there's a quote from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* posted on the wall: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, & again, & forever again."

"You do renew yourself every time you're out there," Kim tells me one day, as we look out at the bay from the upstairs window of the boathouse. Over the course of the winter and spring, we continue to meet up periodically for swims. On this particular morning, it's proving to be a stormy start, and the water is turbulent. "We all have bad days and heartache and heartbreak. But you submerge yourself in that water, and it's like pressing the reset button. It has given me tremendous clarity." Each time she gets in, it's as if the water reflects how she feels and responds in kind. "That's why I have to do it every day."

Swimming from the Farallon Islands, thirty miles out in the Pacific, was for Kim the ultimate extension of how being in deep water could force a kind of surrender. As she likes to put it, the five-mile radius around the islands is the great white sharks' living room. She's just a visitor, passing

through. After her record-breaking swims as part of the first all-female relay team from the Farallons and then as the first solo woman, despite the danger, she would swim there every day if she could. She sometimes takes a weekend jaunt out to the islands, just to swim.

“All my senses are ignited,” she says. “I can smell the sea life. That feeling of being in water that’s six thousand or ten thousand feet deep, and you’re just this tiny person swimming on the surface.” Entrepreneur Vito Biella has described swimming at the Farallons as akin to being in heaven and talking to the devil at the same time. The restlessness of the seascape, Kim says, is captivating for her. “You don’t know what’s swimming underneath you. The seals all around, and the birds. You know you’re not supposed to be there, and a shark could come out of nowhere. It’s tantalizing to be on that edge, to be that connected.”

Before her accident, Kim was a self-described control freak—about her body, about her appearance, about her weight. She had a job in Silicon Valley with long hours and good money. “I was a superficial person,” she says. “I was classically trained as a ballerina, and everything in my world view was very disciplined.” Learning to swim meant learning how to relinquish control, to thrive in a space of uncertainty.

She works hard to prepare for each big swim, but she now finds nothing more exhilarating than jumping in and not knowing what will come. “We live a life on land, and we think we know what’s going to happen,” she tells me, “but we don’t. And I’ve learned how to surrender. It’s so

freeing, and so scary, but you feel like this modern-day explorer. Not many people have gotten into the water in the Farallons. You're like an astronaut out there." In 2016, Kim was inducted into the Explorers Club, which includes among its members astronauts and explorers, including Sir Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, Sylvia Earle, Neil Armstrong, Sally Ride, Thor Heyerdahl, and Jane Goodall.

During the course of our morning swims, I learn from Kim that the daily swim in the bay is where she confronts her demons. Then she shakes their hands. Ten years ago, she was someone who wasn't supposed to walk again. And yet here she is, a multiple world-record holder in a discipline that, back then, she didn't even know existed. It's human nature to resist doing things that are uncomfortable for us. But she finds something extraordinary in pushing through the discomfort to see what's on the other side.