▲ 'For some reason, it's almost impossible to cry in the sea.' Photograph: Cavan Images/Getty

The long read

Cold comfort: how cold water swimming cured my broken heart

by Wendell Steavenson

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On my birthday last year, 6 October, my boyfriend and I split up, after almost a decade together. We were driving back from a holiday in Maine, a last chance to find a way to make it work. We had a lovely time; it didn't change anything.

"We can't ..." "It's not ..." "We don't ..."

All around us the trees were on fire, their leaves gorgeous flaming colours. I looked over the hill in blank terror at the long way down. He would stay in the US, where he worked; I would go to live in the little house we had bought together on the north coast of Brittany. It seemed like the best place to sit out the pandemic, be quiet, lick my wounds, write a little if I could.

We retraced our journey from Maine to New York to Washington DC. I flew to London, took the Eurostar to Paris, the TGV to Morlaix; from Morlaix it was half an hour's drive to the coast. The countryside opened up green and blue as I drove over the last rise and exhaled as I took in the wide view of the sea.

The weather was fresh, windy but sunny. Behind the port, there was our little house, shutters

shuttered, summer roses blown; inside were his clothes and his books, photographs of a life shared, trinkets and souvenirs and memories. I unpacked, wept with the exhaustion of the journey and all the excoriations of failure and loss. Put on my bathing suit.

I never in a million years thought I would be a person who would enjoy swimming in cold water. I swam when the weather was hot, or did laps in indoor swimming pools; I spent a lot of time in the bath. I loved the water, but I was like a cat, I liked being warm more.

It started the summer of 2017. My father had just died. We were living in Paris and good and kind friends lent me their house in Locquirec in Brittany so that I could have some time to be alone, retreat and recover. On the first afternoon, I walked down the lane to the little beach in the port where sailboats were moored, toddlers smashed sandcastles and teenagers jumped into the sea from the harbour wall.

Alone, sad, I stood ankle-deep at the edge of the surf. It was July, but overcast and my arms turned to gooseflesh in the breeze. It was too cold to swim but I didn't want to give up and walk home wet-footed and disappointed. I put off

deciding, walked out a little deeper, the water sloshed icy against my knees, my thighs. After a minute or two, my legs seemed to get used to the temperature. But when the sea lapped my stomach, the cold stabbed and stung. I swayed, delayed defeat. Stood for a long time with the sea around my hips, hesitating, and then, in a moment of suspended thought, I let go. Perhaps it was easier to give in to the sea than to the self-reproach of allowing it to get the better of me. Suddenly, there I was, chest heaving with rapid shallow breaths, arms beating a frantic breaststroke - swimming.

The shock soon subsided and the cold didn't feel so cold. I swam out to a buoy, admired the water sluicing over my shoulders. I swam back to shore and smiled to see my footprints in the sand coming towards me. I had done it! I wanted to call Dad to tell him.

The loss had not yet hit. I was still in that early unreal stage of grief. Dad felt so close that death itself seemed ridiculous, perhaps even a trick. I explored the village: a church with a pierced stone steeple, a cafe and a few restaurants clustered around a small port, a rocky promontory, a wide crescent beach where surfers in wetsuits bobbed like black seals. I walked around the coast

and stared at the blue horizon, wondered at the questions that hung in the space between sea and sky. “Where did you go, Dad?” I asked out loud.

The next day I did it again. And again. I swam every day for three weeks. For some reason, it’s almost impossible to cry in the sea.

In September, my mother, my brothers and I took the Caledonian Sleeper to Rannoch Moor in the Highlands to scatter my father’s ashes in the place where he had grown up. I swam in the freezing loch as my family looked on with some stupefaction. We had never considered swimming when we came here as kids. The water was still and clear and deep. My nose made wrinkles on the surface, I could smell the ancient peat and the mineral tang of granite. I felt a part of the landscape that had always been a part of Dad and that he was now a part of. For a moment the drizzle ceased, the clouds slipped away and the sun lit up the water in a dazzling flash of gold. “It was like Dad came out to say hello,” said my brother Michael.

That Christmas, my boyfriend gave me a serious all-neoprene swimming wetsuit used by triathletes. It was so tight it took

10 minutes to get into it. We went back to stay with our friends in Locquirec for New Year and I tested it in the winter sea. The suit was thin, but shielded me against the cold; I felt invincible. Even so, my hands prickled painfully. Our friends told us they were moving and would soon be selling their house. Did we want to buy it?

Locquirec is maritime and temperate. The coast is like Cornwall on the opposite side of the Channel: rocky, wild, rainy. It can be sunny and glorious in the summer if you are lucky, but it never gets very hot. If the thermometer reads more than 22C, Bretons become a little affronted and go around complaining, "*Ouf! C'est trop chaud!*" Sea temperatures in July and August are about 17 or 18C. Refreshing, shall we say. Over several summers I got used to it and swam every day, even when it was grey and windy and pouring with rain. In the winter I wore my wetsuit and neoprene gloves and boots and a balaclava.

When I arrived, alone, in mid-October last year, the water temperature was about 15C. The sea is always a couple of months behind the seasons, it takes longer

▲ One of *Les Penguins en Peignoirs*. Photograph: Jeff Riou

to cool down in the autumn and longer to warm up again in spring. I wondered if it would be too cold for me, but hauling myself into the superhero suit and peeling it off again was a major operation, so I decided to try to swim without it.

It took me several minutes to immerse myself. Inching. It was not a question of gathering my resolve to punch through my fear. I knew the cold would be initially uncomfortable, but I also knew that the discomfort would pass. So I waited a little for the initial sharpness of the temperature to be blunted. I wanted to swim; eventually, I swam. I yelped at first with shock, but also with delight. Smoother and wider with each stroke, until my shoulders relaxed and I dipped my chin to kiss the surface and began to glide.

The next day, it was easier to get in and the next day even easier. I felt clean and washed and electric. On the fourth day, it was

stormy, and seahorses galloped in the bay. I was surprised to be undeterred. The waves slapped my head and sloshed between the harbour walls, sucking and pulling like a washing machine. The sea swelled and troughed, goggling my vision with seawater one moment, lifting me up into the world again the next. I felt absorbed by its energy. It was exhilarating. I found myself singing an INXS song into the wind at the top of my voice (I had watched a documentary about Michael Hutchence on Netflix the night before). "Mystify! MYSTIFY ME!" Before I realised I was crazily high on endorphins. I didn't want to stop. I had to tell myself to get out of the water before I was swept up and away.

"What happens to me when I swim in cold water?" I asked Mike Tipton, professor of human and applied physiology at the extreme environments laboratory at the University of Portsmouth. Yes, I felt refreshed and energised, but I wanted to understand a little of the physiology behind my reactions.

"We are tropical animals," Tipton said. Homo sapiens evolved in

equatorial plains, he told me. We are comfortable in an ambient air temperature of about 28C. That's why, in cool climes, we were quick to build houses and wear clothes. Plunging into cold water is a considerable shock and the body goes into action: the "fight or flight" response makes you breathe rapidly to take in oxygen, your heart beats faster. In these moments, I told him, my skin goes numb, my chest feels like a radiator and my head fizzes with light.

"The body is responding with all the stress hormones," Tipton said. "You'll see an increase in adrenaline and cortisol, you'll see changes in all of the fight-or-flight biochemical and hormonal responses. It's raising your heart rate, your ventilation. That's the thing that makes people say: 'I feel alive, I feel alert, it wakes me up for the rest of the day.'"

Broken hearts heal slowly; hope is terribly persistent. I cried every day, sometimes soft drippy tears, other times wracking sobs. My mood was fragile, and cracked at any little thing. I dropped one of our blue-rimmed wine glasses on the stone floor and raged as I bent to sweep up the shards.

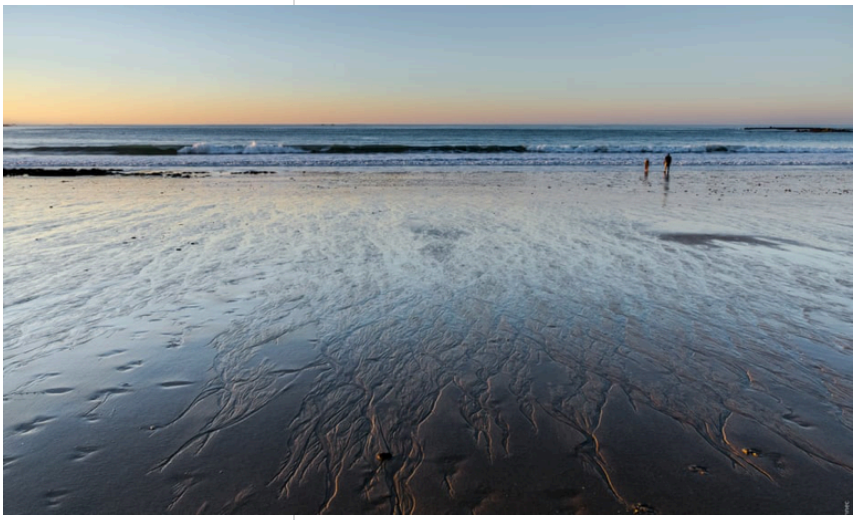
I wrote in my journal:

> *… a feeling of utter desolation sweeps over me like a searchlight. Pain, disappointment sadness; all normal, all part of being human, of living. But I am tired. I procrastinate, get nothing done, wipe something, wash something. Lassitude creeps. I am dogged by broken things. A cabinet door in the kitchen has come off its hinges, the electric blender won't whirr, a piece of flashing has come loose on the roof. It bangs in the wind all night. Wide awake at four in the morning with a glass of whisky-hemlock. Unslept sleep, ragged dreams. Wake up to another bloody day and swim.*

At the beginning of November I tested the sea temperature with my cooking thermometer and it read 12.3C. I put on my neoprene gloves. But I noticed, too, that I now walked into the water easily, without hesitation.

Studies have shown that getting used to cold water is not so much a mental adaptation as a physical one. The effects of what scientists call "cold water shock" - the initial gasping and the rapid increase in heart rate - are reduced with each exposure. And your body "remembers" this

adapted response. Even if you don't go into cold water for weeks or months, when you do go back in, it's not as shocking as the first time.



▲ Locquirec beach at sunrise. Photograph: Jean Pierre Cudennec/Getty Images/EyeEm

People walking along the harbour wall wrapped up in anoraks and scarves would call out to me in the sea: "*Vous êtes courageuse*!" But swimming in cold water is not a question of willpower or overcoming some mental barrier; it's not about conquering yourself or the environment. Like grief, it is an adjustment to a different circumstance, and like grief, too, the process tends to be more of a natural habituation than a result of conscious thought. Three years after his death, I still missed Dad, but now his memory made me smile rather than cry. As I acclimatised to the cold water, I even began to enjoy the initial tingling jolt of submersion.

I was often joined in swimming by other coronavirus exiles in Locquirec. Jeff, a retired police

officer, Jean, another retiree, who had a house on the port and liked to dip quickly in-and-out, the elegant Anne, who wore a chic taupe bathing suite, and Kat, a thirtysomething American married to a Frenchman, who liked to go on a run before swimming. We called ourselves *Les Penguins en Peignoirs* because we wore white towelling bathrobes to wrap around us when we got out. For all of us, it was our first winter swimming. We were the amateurs of the port compared to *Les Bonnets Rouges*, a group of older ladies in distinctive red bathing caps, who had been swimming every day at the beach at the base of the bay for many years.

I would walk down the lane to the beach, tired, heavy, head bent towards the ground. Jeff would ask: “How are you today?” and I would answer: “OK. Well. Not so OK.”

Now the cold jangled for only a few seconds of short breaths, before my chest subsided into the water and I felt the sea envelop me, holding me weightless. Even on dull, grey days, light silvered the surface of the sea and sparkled my vision. My skin was numb so I had no sensation of temperature, but I felt tickles and frissons and ripples. I was simultaneously hot and cold,

simultaneously surprised and calmed. Milky mist on the sea at dawn, blinding sunbeams, glassy clear or spitting windswept waves, still I swam, my arms stretching, slicing through the sea, and Jeff would say: “Oh, you’re smiling now. That’s better!” And for those precious 10 minutes or so of immersion, it was.

At night I lit the fire in the stove, made myself a drink, watched Queer Eye on Netflix, tried to believe in the possibility of transformation, listened to Adele, wept. Knitted sentences into stories. Read other people’s better stories; undone, wept again.

I read *The Lost Cat* by Mary Gaitskill. It is a very sharp novella, crystalline, merciless; it poked me in my bruised places. The cat, of course, is a metaphor for all the lost things she cannot find. She never finds the cat. I wept again.

Oddly, after a few weeks, the unhinged cabinet door fixed itself. My neighbour, a talented tinkerer, repaired the blender. Jeff came round and stuffed the gap between the loose flashing and the roof with kindling and wine corks so that it didn’t bang, even in violent gusts. Problems got solved. But I was still not sure that

I could be the solution to me. My inadequacies woke me in the night, leaked out and spotted my pillow, shamed me. *I can't … I'm not … I don't.*

It rained the whole long darkening month of December. I fell down internet rabbit holes. Scrolled one day through an extract from Obama's memoirs, and was interrupted by a video of Steve Martin and Jerry Seinfeld being interviewed. Seinfeld said: "Comedy is like jumping into the ocean surf and trying to swim. You have to adjust to these forces that are greater than you."

The thing about tides that I had not realised before living next to the sea, is that they are not regular. Locquirec Bay empties to flat sand at low tide (the time to dig for cockles), so I had to swim when it was high. The time of the tide changed every day. The amount of time it changed by also changed every day. Sometimes, high tide was half an hour later than the day before, sometimes it was almost two hours. In addition, the level the tide rose and fell was different all the time. Sometimes, the sea only came halfway up the beach at high tide; a few days later, it would cover the whole strand.

In order to find the best time and place to swim, I had to toggle tide tables and coefficients, the hours of sunrise and sunset and wind directions, and coordinate with Les Penguins en Peignoirs and the timetables of Les Bonnets Rouges. My routine of 20 years, writing in the morning from 9am-2pm, was out the window. I had to learn to be more flexible, to let go of familiars and comfort zones, to go along with the ebb and flow.

Waves luffed and spat in my face or carried me up on swells like the exhalations of a great and gentle giant. The sea was at once predictable and unpredictable, different every day, but every day my compass point, my destination. And an everyday tautology, too: you do something by doing it. Sometimes, swimming was all I could do. There were calm days when the water was crystal clear and days when it was rough and heaved with sand. The weather was constantly changing, too. One moment the sky would be hurling hailstones, the next it was clear and sunny. For me, hope waxed and waned, but not in sync with the moon. I learned to wait out the bad times; it would stop raining, there was a chance that tomorrow the sun might come out and I would feel brighter.

▲ The *Bonnets Rouge* in action. Photograph: Jeff Riou

Beyond the weather, I began to notice the light. Anne-Marie Caroff, the hale founder and leader of *Les Bonnet Rouges,* had been swimming in the sea in Locquirec for 20 years.

"It happens often that the sky looks grim," she told me, "but there is always a small patch of blue somewhere." And it was true. From my sofa, it would look grey and dismal outside, but when I was in the water, a chink of sunlight would find its way from behind the clouds and dazzle the sea with different colours: pink at dawn, lemon under the winter sun, navy in the late afternoon. On clear days, the sea was transformed into flashing turquoise and I swam squinting into the burning path of the sun, eyes closed against the brightness, body jellied, face warmed.

"There is something very intimate about being at eye level with the surface of the sea," observed Kat.

On New Year's Day, I swam with *Les Bonnets Rouge* at dawn. The sky was dark and banked with thunderheads. There were more than 30 of us, and the ladies ran into water shrieking and giggling. "*Bonne année!*" "*Bonne année!*" "*Bonjour Wendy!*" "*Ca va!*" "*Elle est bonne! Elle est bonne!*" "The sea is good! It is good!" Suddenly, the sky opened to the east and we found ourselves swimming in the rain with the sun on our faces into the extraordinary apparition of a huge double rainbow.

When I told friends that I was swimming in the sea every day, they would often say: "Oh, have you looked up that mad Dutchman who's a cold-water guru?" So I watched the episode of Goop, Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle series on Netflix, featuring Wim Hof, the famed Dutch champion of cold-water immersion.

He credits his regime of cold-water swimming and breathing exercises with helping him to overcome the grief of his wife's suicide and control his own immune system. Hof is a yogic 61-

year-old with long hair, a beard and an evangelical certitude. His website promises to deliver health and happiness through his ice-bath workshops, online courses, apps and books. In the Netflix episode, the volunteers jump one after another into the freezing water of Lake Tahoe, in California, the largest freshwater lake in the Sierra Nevada mountains, and emerged apparently transformed. "That was like next-level shit," says one.

The healthful properties of cold water are much touted by its disciples, but little examined. "You're talking about something at the homeopathic, at the esoteric, Wim Hof end of things," said Tipton. "It's easier to get funding to investigate drowning." For years, scientists have been more focused on the dangers of cold water than its possible benefits.

There is no doubt that the stimulation of cold water provokes changes of hormones and chemicals - adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin, endorphins - through the body. We know that these affect metabolism, boost white blood cell counts, and over time and regular exposure, can reduce inflammation - potentially priming and increasing immune function - although exactly how is less well understood.

There are many conditions and diseases caused or exacerbated by autoimmune reactions and inflammation - atrial fibrillation, arterial sclerosis, inflammatory bowel disease, type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer's, depression; so it's very tempting to imagine that something as free and available as cold water could be therapeutic.

But the research is thin and remains anecdotal. Cold-water swimmers say they experience fewer infections, the easing of sore muscles and arthritic pain; some swimmers suffering from anxiety and depression have reported recovering to the extent that they can stop using medication.

But there has been almost no research to isolate which ingredient of the cold water swimming experience is causing what result. Does a cold shower do the trick? Or is total immersion better? And how long does exposure to cold water need to be: one minute, or 10? Once a week or every day? What's the dose?

Whatever is happening, the physiological changes seem to be more than transitory. "There's a component of the adaptation to cold, we would argue, that is generic to all stresses," says Tipton. In other words, getting used to cold water means you

may also be able to better tolerate other stressful environments. Tipton has experimented by sending cold-water swimmers up mountains (in simulation) and observed that they breathed more evenly, using less oxygen, and were less impaired by the altitude.

I told Tipton that I had noticed I was a lot calmer recently, that I did not get so upset when, for example, I broke a glass.

“So is the cold water making me less psychologically stressed about other things, not just physical things such as temperature?” I asked him.

“The honest answer is I don’t know,” he said. “But I have no doubt that there is a common component to all of this. We just don’t know what it is.”

Anne-Marie Caroff has 80 people on her mailing list for Les Bonnets Rouges, about half of whom swim regularly through the winter.

She believes the benefits are as much social as they are physical. *Les Bonnets Rouges* has evolved into a congenial collective, they exchange surplus harvests from their gardens, tomatoes in the summer, apples in the autumn. They go on fishing expeditions together, to dig for clams or to

gather samphire in the river estuary. *Les Bonnets Rouges* started a tradition of the last dip of the year on 31 December, or the first dip of the year on 1 Jan (depending on the time of the tide) and now more than 100 people gather to swim and splash. People bring hot chocolate and *vin chaud* and homemade cakes and the local newspaper sends a photographer. At the end of the summer they have a big picnic - "it gets a little crazy" admitted Caroff - everyone brings a lot of food, and there are maybe 50 or 60 people there. When the moon is full in summer and the tide is right they organise nocturnal swims. "I never found the sea so wonderful as under the moonlight," she said.

Caroff told me that February and March were the most difficult months, the sea was at its coldest. But through February, the colder the water, the stronger I felt. I had assumed there would come a point when I would use the wetsuit, but I never did. My brain itself felt different, as if its circuits were fizzing with new current. For many years, I had carried a heaviness in my head, a weight of not-good-enough. There was a long list of things that could make me feel stuck and stupid, I was alone, cut off from friends and family by coronavirus and Brexit,

living off savings, emotionally hungover from the break-up - and yet, quite often, I felt strangely marvellous.

Sometime around Valentine's Day, I stopped crying. I stopped railing and hurling and hurting when something went wrong: an editor's rejection, a burnt cake, the time I left €200 in the cashpoint machine.

I was respectful of the cold, but not afraid of it any more. In the same way I was becoming respectful of my sadnesses and disappointments, but not afraid of feeling them.

In February there was a cold snap. The roads iced over and cars slid into the verges. On the beach the sand was frozen in crusts and rimed with frost. The air was so frigid, the sea felt relatively warm even though the thermometer read 5C. I had to swim backwards because the wind was whipping snow into my face. My mind was taken over, not with the balm of buoyancy but with an interior tension, a clenched focus of sheer survival. When I got out my body was scalded lobster red.

I had thought there was a limit to what I could do, but now I saw that there was no limit. *Les*

Bonnets Rouges laughed about the snow storm: "*Ouf*! It was a bit fresh last week! But now the temperature is back up to 7C!" I had survived the worst of the winter. I bought daffodil bulbs and watched them bloom cheerful and yellow.

Yann, a friend of mine in the village, had been having a hard time dealing with his multiple sclerosis. He was in his 40s, in the past he had surfed all through the winter, worked hard, taken care of his six-year-old twins; now he was tired, physically and emotionally. When he came back from hospital after an attack I persuaded him to come swimming with me. The sea temperature had risen to a balmy 9C, cold enough to make the uninitiated wince, so I told him he'd better wear a wetsuit in the beginning.

"WAAHOO it's fucking cold!" he cried, wading to his waist. A couple of minutes later, he reported: "It's getting a little better." A couple of minutes later and he was floating. "AIEE! It's cold when it trickles down the neck of your wetsuit!"

"Ah, yes," I teased him, "of course, if you don't wear a wetsuit you can avoid that."

Yann swam the next day and the next. Each time he found it a little

easier, as I had. Each time he said he felt much better, *"super-bien"* afterwards and left the beach smiling. "It's reviving me! Even if I think I am tired," he said, "the sea wakes me up."

Caroff admitted to me she was sure she was addicted. It may have been all the endorphins, but as the weeks went by I found swimming became less about the cold or overcoming it and more about those precious few minutes of wonder. I experienced a pure lucidity. It was, I began to understand, a kind of meditation, a submission to the fundamentals of water and light - and to the beauty - the way the rain veiled the bay in grey gossamer, raindrops bounced up from the surface, gulls skimmed low and cormorants dove in elegant parabolas. Waves flashed, I closed my eyes against the blaze of sunlight.

She told me that even after 20 years of swimming, she still surprised herself every time she went in. "I can be walking the dog and wrapped up in a coat and scarf and hat, and then five minutes later I am on the beach in nothing but a swimming costume - it's almost as if I don't know how this happens. It's curious."

When I am in the sea I am a mystery to myself. I have no idea

how I got here, or why or what I am doing. I am only swimming and I am amazed.

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