

# The Practice of Swimming Naked Among the Waves

*Editor's Note:*

*Swimming naked in the ocean in the quiet of night is like returning home, Susan Lynch writes. Suspended in buoyant darkness, unburdened by daytime commotion, shrieking consumerism, or constraining clothing, she revisits her primordial roots. She is ageless and weightless and undifferentiated, as fluid as the element that buoys her.*

*Lynch's aquatic home affords no refuge, though, if water quality is compromised. When she speaks of the commercialization, manipulation, and "ownership" that threaten her ocean haven, Lynch touches on the theme of this issue of 41°N—water quality and the price of preserving it.*

*"The Practice of Swimming Naked Among the Waves" was the second place winner in the 1998 Rumowicz Maritime Essay Contest. The annual competition showcases the work of University of Rhode Island (URI) undergraduates whose writings explore various aspects of the sea. The contest is an outgrowth of the URI Literature of the Sea lecture and seminar series endowed by Edmund S. and Nathalie Rumowicz.*

*Lynch, a lifelong Rhode Islander, earned undergraduate degrees in urban affairs and German in 1998 and a master's degree in community planning in 2000. She works in municipal planning for the Massachusetts engineering and environmental consulting firm Beals and Thomas.*

I have heard people say that staring out at the horizon over the ocean is a calming and peaceful, almost spiritual, experience. They say that gazing out and seeing no end to the horizon and watching the ocean go on forever are reassuring. I tried it. After about 15 minutes or so I gave up out of sheer boredom and ran to frolic among the waves. Those same people would be shocked to hear the type of "spiritual" connection that I have to the ocean. My immediate visualization of and pinnacle of experience with the ocean is of swimming naked in the waves at night.

I must admit that my first experience swimming in the buff in the salt water was aided, although only in the slightest way, by what is sometimes referred to as liquid courage—a \$3.60 bottle of red wine. I did not like the taste of the wine but drank it back fiercely, with purpose.

We walked the beach and reveled in the soft, wet, salty, night air. Three of my closest female friends accompanied me. Having just closed a chapter in our lives—graduating from high school—we felt as if we could attempt to do the unconventional. A last big hurrah, if you will. Amid vows to stay friends forever and teary reminiscence about events that took place not two weeks ago, we cast caution to the wind and our clothes onto the beach and ran for the surf.

## Nightswimming

The wet sand, taking a respite from the punishing sun, cool in the night air, is one of the sensations I remember. The water is warmer than the air. We huddle in the protective warmth of the sea against the night chill. The waves are mellow, tired of the many bodies that run rampant in and out of the refreshing water during the day. We float and are silent.

Since that day I have undertaken quite a few clandestine swimming excursions. I have experienced nothing that comes close to the joy and freedom that I feel floating there. Sometimes I bob along with the waves. Once in a while I

try to harness the energy and rhythms of the ocean and hitch a ride to shore. What I enjoy best is lying on my back under the stars with my feet sticking out of the blackness, my arms open to the stars and my face delivered to the moon, while the sea lulls me into tranquility.

Regardless of how I choose to spend my time in the dark waters, I always have a huge and, some might argue, goofy, grin on my face. I enjoy myself thoroughly. Out in the waves, in the night air, I am completely and fully happy. My pores intoxicate themselves on the salt water surrounding them and my organs smile at me. The night is the best time for this sort of swimming pleasure. During the day there are too many people and not enough stars. The commotion of the beach would interrupt my reverie, and I might be arrested for indecent exposure.

I always assumed that discarding my clothing and rushing toward the water's edge with recklessness and abandon were a large part of these immense feelings and sensations of joy. For a little while I become a wild child, at one with nature, friend of the sea, cohort of the stars. I am unfettered by social constraints, literal or figurative. Michael Stipe of REM captures the mixture of pleasure and irreverence with his song "Night-swimming": "I forgot my shirt at the water's edge . . . . The fear of getting caught, of recklessness and water."

Some of his other lyrics, however, hint at something a little subtler and, perhaps, sublime: "These things, they go away, replaced by everyday . . . . The bright, tight forever drum could not describe nightswimming." These lines suggest that the experience of nightswimming, as he terms it, is inspired by something beyond mere wanton impetuosity. Contemplating what, if anything, might influence or heighten my experience in the night water, I look to the history of the earth.

### **Evolutionary Memory**

"Life evolved in the sea. It stayed there for a majority of the history of the earth," according to the "Introduction to Evolutionary Biology" Web site. Vertebrates are relative newcomers to dry land, arriving a mere 380 million years ago. Perhaps, then, the history of our species has a little something to do with my fascination with the sea. We have been away too long. We are jealous of the fishes and the sharks, their grace and fluidity of movement, that render our movements in negotiating dry terrain almost obscene. We could be longing for the freedom and weightlessness of aquatic environments.

Swimming in the ocean inspires peace and harmony in the same way that traveling home does after being away for a long time. I am visiting my roots, then, and it gives me happiness.

### **Last Refuge**

My first experience was shared with people dear to me. Although I rarely see them anymore, they are with me when I swim. The sensations in the surf bring me back, close to them as on that first night. I was not aware at the time, but our swim among the waves, naked and free for a little while, helped us. Women—especially in high school when self-confidence is almost as hard to come by as an 'A' in calculus—are bombarded with and hurt by unattainable ideals, eating

disorders, and strict fashion regulations. Being happy and at home with one's body becomes a luxury. That first night swim momentarily took us out of this sphere and made us all beautiful. This knowledge is a compass that I am privileged to carry with me as I navigate through our cultural biases.

Perhaps for me the ocean is the last civilized place on earth. When I am out there, I do not buy or sell anything. I cannot watch television, listen to the radio, or (not yet) see any billboard advertisements. I am, for a short time, immune to cross marketing, consumerism, and commercialism. I cannot eat a Big Mac. I cannot answer the telephone. I have no advertisements for clothing or sneaker companies on my bare physique—until, of course, they start to sell tattoos. I am free to be an individual with no pressure to conform. I am, for a short moment, ageless and genderless. I have no model to emulate, no goal to reach.

I fear that even this last refuge will soon be encroached upon. Waiting at the water's edge are those who would make a commodity of even one of the most powerful forms of nature. The beach, during the day, worries me. The sun-worshipping, cancer-courting beach residents of the day do not seem to see the sea for its sublime beauty or life-affirming potential. Perhaps they flock to the ocean for a mere glimpse of it. Maybe they have forgotten how to enjoy and embrace their vitality. Maybe they are afraid of what might happen if they did. Maybe they are wound up so tightly in societal constraints that they cannot simply drop their drawers and flail around in the waves.

Even more threatening are the buyers and sellers, marketers and advertisers, corporations and consumers that are getting too close for comfort. They seem crouched for attack, ready to market a waterproof beeper or a floating television set. Even more frightening, they want to limit access to the ocean to those who can afford to pay the membership fee. In the grand tradition of the United States of America, what cannot be owned is bought and sold to the highest bidder. Maybe the next time I decide to swim unburdened by material constraints, I will be arrested for trespassing, for swimming in the water that "belongs" to someone and not to everyone.

I am, therefore, worried about the sea. I am concerned that I no longer may be able to swim under the stars without a care in the world. No longer will I be able to go home to my primordial roots. No longer will I be able to immerse myself in a huge embrace of life. Gone will be my escape from the ludicrous gender ideals that I am expected to attain.

I may be able to salvage some other remnant of civilization within which to fortify myself against a barrage of consumerism. But even those remnants are difficult to find. I fear what this portends for the world in general. For now, however, I will continue my practice and revel in the joy that it brings me and try to convert others to the practice of swimming naked in the waves. Michael Stipe of REM sings, "Nightswimming deserves a quiet night." I agree.

**Works Cited:**

Introduction to Evolutionary Biology: [www.ta1korigins.org/faqs/faq-into-to-biology.html](http://www.ta1korigins.org/faqs/faq-into-to-biology.html)

REM. Nightswimming. *Automatic for the People*:  
[bubblegum.uark.edu?REM/guitar/nightswimming.txt](http://bubblegum.uark.edu?REM/guitar/nightswimming.txt)