

FLOATING

by Barbara Mundall

Why, you might wonder, would I close myself in a box which could be likened to either a large coffin, if you're very claustrophobic, or to the passenger compartment of a compact car, if you're mildly claustrophobic?

The box in which I willingly confined myself is a fiberglass closed tank holding ten inches of water made buoyant by dumping in 1100 pounds of epsom salts. It's been called a flotation tank or a sensory deprivation tank and I did it out of curiosity.

The term sensory deprivation is really all wrong. Because what the tank provides is sensory enhancement. While it is true that you float free of gravity, with no sound, no light, and nobody, what happens in the tank is that your senses are acutely sharpened.

The flotation tank was developed in the 1960's at the National Institute for Mental Health where John Lilly, M.D. was conducting research into brain physiology and consciousness.

Over the past years the tanks have gained wider use outside the laboratory and are increasingly used for therapeutic purposes as well as recreation. The tanks, in fact, have been touted as having the same potential mass appeal as the hot tub or sauna.

The movie "Altered States" also gained wider attention for the tanks through the sensationalized story of a scientist who uses the tank to trip back through his evolutionary history into a primitive state.

The claims for the tank are as multitudinous as the claims of an itinerant medicine man or a modern day chemical miracle: pain relief, stress reduction, increased creativity, direct access to the right hemisphere of the brain, problem solving, smoking cessation, weight reduction, accelerated learning and many more.

Yet many of the claims have been documented. Michael Hutchinson in *The Book of Floating* details many of the research projects and their findings.

But whatever data is gathered, many or most people will search out the flotation tanks simply as a highly effective way of relaxing and of exploring their inner mind.

Which are much the reasons I chose to slosh about in the fiberglass womb.

The Eugene Floatation Center office looks like the sort of place you can expect to have something notarized. A sensible and authoritative desk, comfy beige chairs, the obligatory Eugene fern.

Through a door are two large white rooms, each with its own tank plopped there like a space capsule just splashed down, only the water is inside not outside. For each tank there's an adjoining room with dressing area and shower.

In the tank room an assistant explained the procedures. I could control from within the tank, she said, an intercom to call the front desk if I needed assistance, dials to operate lights, the flow of air and the in-tank speakers if I chose to listen to music. She showed me how to put in the earplugs (pay attention; I didn't get the earplugs in properly and for days the salt delta in my ears rattled every time I swallowed. You have no idea how often you swallow until it makes noise when you do it).

Wes Bigelow, the owner, advised that I not listen to music the first time through, but instead simply float and enjoy. He also suggested that I try it twice. The first time, he feels, is largely devoted to observation of the novelty and that the experience is better the second time when you're past testing the door.

I certainly tested the door. I opened the door. I re-opened the door. I tried opening the door with one arm in case I should become disabled in the tank.

During the float I tried everything. Lights on. Lights off. The intercom (in case I needed rescuing).

And I experienced everything. I was bored and wished I knew how much longer I had to endure the nothingness. I fell asleep. And I had wonderful images and free-flowing ideas.

It was the free association of thoughts that I enjoyed most. Suddenly and vividly I recalled a painting by a Portland artist C.N. Wyckoff which I saw years ago, of faces floating in water, hair spread out like blankets. And I also felt myself to be one of the figures.

I had other strong images—one of myself as the needle of a compass rotating slowly round and round until I felt dizzy although I was not moving at all in reality.



Detail: *Water Bodies No. 9 with Detail* by C.N. Wyckoff. Colored pencil on paper.

I didn't find it easy to relax completely the first time in the tank. I was bothered briefly not by the dark but by the damp heaviness of the air in the tank. Then I was bothered by the dark, but found that I was fine if I shut my eyes so that I was creating the dark myself.

I also found that while the water is incredibly buoyant, so that you float with your nose and eyes out of the water, my head felt heavier than the rest of my body and to really relax my neck it was necessary to fold my arms and rest my head on them. The second time in the tank I relaxed so quickly and fully that this wasn't necessary. In fact, I became relaxed to the point that I became completely disassociated from my body.

I loved the floating feeling but longed to have the same feeling free of the limits of the tank. So I simply envisioned myself where I wanted to be. My float, then, occurred largely somewhere in the Caribbean, in a turquoise sea, under a brilliant sun,

I was not, however, a very crisp potato chip. In fact, I was in a state I might term semi-zonked. Not exactly lethargic, but not exactly alert, either. It struck me that I wasn't quite safe out on the streets as I stood on the curb for what seemed minutes unable to come to a decision about when it might be safe to cross.

Semi-zonked is one way to look at it. The other is that I've never felt more relaxed. Although I also feel equally relaxed after a massage or facial. At \$15 an hour (\$12 for students) a float is less expensive than either. And the kind of vivid imagery that I enjoyed is not a byproduct of either facials or massages.

There seem to be two major concerns people have about trying flotation tanks. First, there's the claustrophobia issue. If you're really frightened of dark, enclosed spaces, it may not be for you. But if you simply dislike being in elevators but take them anyway, you'll do what everyone else does—you'll open the tank door a few times and then float blissfully into a wonderfully relaxed state.

The second concern seems to be one about the tank functioning as a petri dish. You'll be glad to know that the Floatation Center goes to considerable effort to assure cleanliness, with far more precautions than I care to go into here, but which Wes Bigelow recited for me, and will recite for you if that's your particular neurosis.

Neuroses and stress are exactly the kinds of things you'll want to take into the tank. So that you can get rid of them. In a world where we're constantly assaulted by sensory stimuli, the tank is a real revelation in discovering your own self and a profound level of relaxation. It's rather like taking your car in when you've got a rough idle and getting a tune-up. The tank is a tune-up for your overloaded senses.

I've always liked a quote I ran across from a blind man, who said, "When you're blind you don't hear better, like people think, you just listen more." The tank's a place to take time out to listen more—to your own inner self.

The Eugene Floatation Center is located at 1342 High Street, Suite 2 and is open 8 am-10 pm daily. Phone 484-1530 for more information.

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