

# SCRATCHPAD

## Sense and sensory deprivation

Stepping out of your story.

By **ERICK BENDEL**  
COAST WEEKEND

In the darkness, I bobbed supine on a 10-inch pool of water inside a chamber 8 feet long, 4 feet wide and 4 feet high.

I'd finally decided to use my gift certificate for one free session in a floatation tank at Designing Health on Commercial Street in Astoria. A loved one with claustrophobia gave it to me a year ago so I could undergo the sensory deprivation and report back.

To be sure, I wasn't deprived of my senses entirely. There was the warm water beneath me, the scent of the Epsom salts that kept me buoyed, and the dull, reassuring sound of my heartbeat.

After 20 or so minutes in moist blackness, waiting for a delightful hallucination or access to the godhead, I gave up trying to force an outcome and opted to let the experience take whatever form it chose.

In the end, the sensation was neither of enclosure nor spaciousness. It wasn't creatively inspiring, though many artists and spiritual seekers use these devices

toward that end. Rather, the feeling was one of — how can I put this sanely? — becoming untethered from a plot.

Sometimes, when I feel as if I've hopped onto the wrong boxcar and let myself get carried into unfriendly territory, I try to step into a former way of thinking, perhaps a mindset from five or 10 years ago. Revert to an old operating system.


Then, after living in that bygone world, shuffling among the ruins of my younger self's cares and worries, I open my eyes to take in my everyday environ-

ment, as though smash cutting to the present. I view the now with the clear eyes of a visitor able to see the temporal distance covered and put the present into perspective.

My hour in the floating tank was like a more immersive version of that meditative exercise, of shutting out the detritus and maddening stimuli of the day and marveling at the sequence of events that brought me to this place — a wet, humid, unfathomably relaxing cocoon.

When my 60 minutes was up, I showered, pulled out my ear plugs

and dressed. I stepped onto the gray, chilly sidewalks of downtown Astoria, the small stage on which the several-act drama of my life has played out these last few years. For at least an hour, I saw my surroundings with a lightness, detachment and relief that comes from knowing that whatever plot we're a part of, whatever role we're playing right now, we're merely passing through a scene. And there are many scenes to savor.

Like most profound experiences, you get out of sensory deprivation what you bring to it, and you may not even know what that is until you do it. What I brought to the floatation tank, it seems, was a need for objectivity and escape. Who knew. 

### coast Weekend

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The Great Republic grounded on the Columbia River's Sand Island in 1879. While the ship will not be covered in a presentation during the Shipwreck Conference, it is in a book the Maritime Archaeological Society is working on.

CHRIS DEWEY/MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY.

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