

Wild Swimming and Spirituality

Imogen Nay plunges into “the real”



Mud, reeds and insects – wild swimming in Suffolk

Photo credit: Clare Redfern

During my weekly swims in my local swimming pool, I wonder about the language of water and what it might be trying to communicate. The indoor swimming pool is something of a metaphor for how the culture of 21st century UK utilises water for leisure and exercise. The swimming pool's artificial environment, love of speed and competition, and unnaturally blue water, reveals a particular approach to natural resources. It must be contrasted with the actual state of our waterways, rivers, and seas.

The clear, blue water in our indoor pools is maintained by the use of chemicals; the water in the pool contrasts to the water in our landscapes which is a recipient of deadly chemical run-

off and sewage. The *Guardian* reported in 2020 that “all English rivers failed to meet the quality tests for pollution”. This pollution of UK waters has only got worse; regular articles in the media reflect public outrage at the illegal dumping of raw sewage by water companies, the result being wild swimmers and triathletes getting sick after swimming outside.

Yet, wild swimming has increased in popularity, with regular TV programmes, on-trend podcasts and Facebook groups extolling the virtues of cold-water dipping, swimming in your local river and generally getting outside in nature for the health benefits. It might just be that as we seek the healing

value of nature we do so at the point where it is crying out for its own healing. This intersection between nature's need for us and our need of it, is critical to where real transformation and change might come from.

Water has long been a metaphor within religious traditions for healing, purity, and wholeness. Ritual ablution across traditions speak of the need for purity and cleanliness that is ethical as well as literal. Jesus critiqued the religious rituals of hand washing in his day, whilst talking about offering water that will “well up” and bring eternal life: “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). His own baptism at the River Jordan, is a moment of revelation, at which the voice from heaven declares Jesus as “Son”: “A voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased’” (Mark 1:11).

Baptism rituals in the early Church soon developed into elaborate rites that spoke powerfully and dramatically of death to the old self and new birth. Water, as Tillich has argued, is essential to and not arbitrary in baptism¹. Water, in other words, is a gift from God in creation that communicates; like fire, earth and air, it is a fundamental principle. As Jesus knew, water is an essential component in the giving of life, as well as being the element that cleanses, heals, and comforts. Baptism, if done well, harnesses the power, language, and value of water to communicate the Christian understanding of rebirth and new life that we believe comes from Jesus.

In my local lido, all through the winter season a “Sunday-serotonin swim” is organised, to encourage cold-water dipping and the attendant health benefits. This new craze (the lido is going through just its third winter opening season) is in explicit contrast and challenge to the artificial, indoor water-worlds, with the perfect ambient temperature, and warm water beloved of wealthy societies. The lido is still a pool with treated water, and yet it is unheated, with beautiful grand trees flanking its edges. This outdoor context, with the extended length of the pool, and the cold water, is an invitation to many today, it seems, to step outside of our comfort zones. Many other groups of outdoor swimmers meet on beaches or on riversides, where they encounter mud and reeds, insects and animals, fishes, and all sorts of life during their swim. There are no lifeguards or changing rooms, just friends and chatter, flasks, and nakedness.

Breaking into “the real”, away from our commodified and pre-packaged lifestyles, opens us to the vulnerability and excitement of flesh and of touch. In real water we encounter



Photo credit: Nathan Cirna on Unsplash

“water gushing up to eternal life....” Cascade de la vis, France

other life-forms that swarm, or grow, that swell, or flash. In stepping into the wild we step out of our human-made and controlled zones devoid of otherness; we move into stranger worlds. Stepping into the wild also means realising that our rivers are dying, that we're being robbed of our natural assets, and that we're being offered alternative fake worlds that can't satisfy or truly heal.

Jesus' words echo in my ears: “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). The water that God gives is real and true, it is a water that we long for and need. The spirituality of natural habitats is there to enable us to live better lives and at the same time, to enable us to offer life to that which gives us so much joy. If only I could take baptism candidates down to the river for their spiritual awakening. Yet the state of our rivers tells another story. Connecting the value and meaning of our natural landscapes with our human experience and our spiritual needs, seems to me to be essential to how we recover wholeness for ourselves and our beloved planet. ■



Revd Imogen Nay is vicar at St Paul's, Hills Road, Cambridge, and is Bishop's Advisor for Climate in the Diocese of Ely. Prior to ordination she worked with the vulnerably housed, and those suffering from addictions. She is studying for a doctorate researching the spiritual significance of water, and is passionate about caring for God's creation.

This article is based on an article in *Practical Theology* which can be accessed at [tandfonline.com](https://www.tandfonline.com). Imogen's talk on this topic for our online workshops can be viewed on YouTube or via the Green Christian website.

1 *The Protestant Era*, Paul Tillich, University of Chicago Press, 1948