Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Plunging into Wonder

Kate Lewis © 30 August 2026

This month I committed to swimming every day, in the sea, without a wetsuit, in order to raise money for a friend's charity. The water temperature has hovered around 13 degrees C, which is cold enough to cause numbness and pain. It's cold enough that I have to remind myself each time, while getting in, why I am doing this.

The charity is called Kenzie's Gift, and it funds therapy and mental health support for children and young people grieving the death or serious illness of a sibling or parent. My friend Nic's 3 year old daughter died from a rare cancer 21 years ago. Nic had a 5 year old son at the time, was a single mother, and had very little money. The health care system provided a couple of mental health sessions for her son, but it was not enough; Nic was so frustrated that she started Kenzie's Gift, named after her daughter MacKenzie. The charity funds 12 therapy sessions each for children who are grieving; since 2008 it has funded therapy for thousands of children.

Having said that, I have other reasons for wanting to swim every day in cold, cold water; it is both generous and self-serving. Cold water swimming, immersion in water that is below 15°C, can be good for the body and the mind. My experience, as with many others, is that it is good for both physical and mental health.

This is an excerpt from a book called Chill, by Mark Harper, a British anaesthesiologist who has researched the benefits of cold water swimming.

> One of the most common comments I hear when I tell people I enjoy cold water swimming is "You must be

> mad.” How, they often ask, can something as stress-inducing as cold water swim- ming possibly be good for you?
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> The answer, in a word, is hormesis, an adaptive response of cells and organisms to moderate and intermittent stress.
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> The concept of hormesis is often traced back to an early- sixteenth-century Swiss scientist and physician known as Paracelsus… His best-known maxim roughly translates as: “All things are poison, and nothing is without poison. The dosage alone makes it so a thing is not a poison.”
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> Basically, high doses of any substance, including water and oxygen, are potentially toxic and even lethal, but exposure to low doses can be good for us because they promote resistance and resilience.
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> Hormesis—a low-level good/high-level bad model—also applies to physical stresses.
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> The stresses that induce tissue resilience … arise from everyday sources, most notably ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Essential to our production of vitamin D, ultraviolet light can, at low levels, improve cardiovascular health, enhance resistance to cancer, and improve immune function, mood, and sleep. Conversely, at high levels, such stresses cause tissue destruction. In the case of ultraviolet light, these stresses include sunburn and, at the extreme, malignant melanoma.
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> Similarly, excessive exposure to cold leads to hypothermia, but moderate and intermittent exposure to cold allows us to withstand the stress, which produces positive health benefits and gives us the confidence and physical and mental ability to endure other stresses in the future.

You have to be careful. When you start investigating cold water swimming you will find many reasons that make it unhealthy. The stages of cold water immersion include first, “cold shock,” in which

Rapid skin cooling initiates an immediate gasp response, inability to hold breath and hyperventilation.

This lasts several minutes. The body is pumping blood away from your skin and limbs to support your brain and heart. *Heart rate and blood flow pressure spike at the same time, creating intense strain on the cardiovascular system.*

You can move but start losing control over your arms and legs. Your core temperature falls, and hypothermia starts to set in. "Hypothermia usually only becomes a contributor to death if immersion lasts for more than 30 minutes."
Then, when you get out you experience the Afterdrop, when *your core body temperature continues to drop as colder blood from your limbs returns to your vital organs during the early stages of rewarming*.

It is critical to get into warm clothes and ideally drink or eat something warm. Feeling cold can last for hours after swimming. At one point a couple of years ago when I came back from a sunrise swim and crawled into bed Ted was so shocked that he said he wouldn't have thought it was possible to be so cold to the touch and still be alive.

This is the science behind cold water swimming: the physiology includes risks and benefits.

When does the wonder start?

Here's what I have written about my swims:

Day 3 of the Winter Swim Challenge: Anna, Nic, and I swam at midday - an exhilarating lunch break and an energy boost for the rest of the afternoon. Today felt easier than the first two days; I'm starting to adjust to the cold shock and the discipline. I go, period. Mitigating factor: It was a gorgeous, sunny day with good company on the bench.

Heat radiated through me before undressing, sun brought a bit of warmth walking across the beach, then the transition to frigid water, numb feet to legs to crotch (yow)! Today Nic had the go-pro, so she filmed me in my first plunge all the way under; it felt like I had just gotten in and wasn't ready, but I go down ... and surface gasping for air.
I try to slow my breathing, but each breath catches in short bursts.
I wait, stay calm. I move every part of me as fast as I can, pushing and pulling against the water; my heavy limbs object. In a few minutes I feel the tingle, the rush. I am so cold on the outside that it prickles, but the pain lessens, and the joy arrives. It takes

longer to get my face under enough to swim. Breast stroke first, quickly dipping my face, some back stroke when it hurts so much I need a break, finally free style when I can tolerate the face freeze.
Then I don't want to get out, want to swim and swim. I float on my back and feel the cold like thousands of tiny knives, but they don't hurt now. I am fully present, conscious of my body in a way that is impossible in daily life. There is nothing except the chill, the sun and blue sky, the clear line on my skin between that which is immersed and that which floats above. Usually we talk about our top half as above our waist, our equator. Floating on my back it's a longitudinal line rather than latitudinal, the prime meridian.
I force myself to get out and join the others, both to be social and to avoid hypothermia. I have to go back to work, feeling thrilled at having shown up.

Two days later I wrote:

I finally finished the workday and walked with Ilya the greyhound down to Narrow Neck beach. We walked the length of the beach and back while I avoided getting in. Getting undressed in the windy darkness is a world apart from Cheltenham on a warm, sunny midday. I felt so cold walking down the wide, wide beach in my togs - low tide - how can the water be that far away?? that I was mildly surprised that the water still felt bone-chilling. I was in for only a few minutes but felt overjoyed. I kept telling Ilya how good it felt, but he just looked at me. Time to go home for dinner.

Days 5 & 6:

It was fully dark when I went to Narrow Neck at 6:30 pm on both nights. It took conviction to get in on Wednesday (Day 5), and I told myself I only needed to be in for a few minutes, just long enough to feel the transition from pain to endorphins. After plowing out through the shallows of low tide I lowered myself up to my chin, gasping and churning warmth into my limbs. The surface of the water glimmered, reflections from the street light, and then stars rushed around my hands... sparkling bioluminescent creatures. I laughed out loud. They surrounded my feet, my arms, my hands; every movement triggered a fleeting display. I stuck my head under for a close up but without goggles they were a blur; the next night I brought goggles and swam underwater for as long as I could stand the face freeze in order to join them in their world. I stayed in so long that afterwards I struggled to get my bathing suit off; my fingers were chilled stiff.

These swims give me unexpected gifts each day. I'm thinking about grief and how much this is helping me. It is on-going inspiration.

Day 8: The Hardest Yet

Saturday evening after a cool, cloudy day of feeling tired... and Ilya and I walk down to the beach to find an onshore breeze and choppy seas. Ack. Due to work and a

scheduling mix-up earlier this is the 4th day of swimming alone and the 3rd in the dark. I start to pull off my clothes, feeling cold, grumpy, and lonely, when a woman in a bathing suit comes down the ramp and walks into the water. A man in shorts follows... Oh yay! Suffering loves company. And of course I only suffer for a short time, cross over to exhilaration and am exuberant to have dragged myself in. There aren't any glowing critters due to the chop, but from the water I see Ilya's coat reflecting the streetlight by the edge of the sea. He has wandered down from the wall to wait for me. Four of us here; I am not alone.

Day 10:

Monday afternoon and I race to the beach to catch the last warming rays while the tide is high. The days are short and the sun on the east-facing coast even shorter. After swimming down the beach and back the eight of us scramble into clothes as fast as our chilled fingers allow. Ilya the greyhound and Henry the schnauzer wander nearby, and a myriad of curious walkers smile and admire our bravery and fortitude. Part of the fun is doing something that other people can't imagine doing and feeling smug.

It's hard to overstate the power of this experience, the joy of camaraderie on a calm, sunny afternoon, when it's exactly where I want to be, contrasted with overcoming the resistance of darkness, cold wind, and fatigue at the end of a long day. The former fills me with warmth and laughter; the latter drives the satisfaction of having accomplished something out of sheer stubbornness and determination. The cold always brings exhilaration that fills me to my core; that is the constant without which I would be hard-pressed to get in again and again. I am doing this to help others, children suffering through something they should not have to experience, and I benefit so deeply that my dominant feeling is gratitude.

In the description introducing this talk I wrote “After a month of daily cold-water swimming and meditation Kate will reflect on the physical, emotional, and spiritual effects of these disciplines. Understanding the science behind the practices does not reduce them to dry and rational explanations but adds to our experience of awe and wonder.”

I decided to talk about the meditation another time, since it is a topic unto itself.

With respect to the science and the wonder of cold-water swimming, my obvious and cliched conclusion is that our bodies are truly amazing things. The physiological effects of cold-water immersion in small, repeated doses, can lead to resilience, to intense joy, to physical benefits. I hurt my back over this time period and found that swimming helped it for the rest of the day;

research suggests this is because of change in blood circulation that reduces inflammation. I have swum with single-celled creatures that look like stars around me in the water. I am more tolerant of cold, physical and emotional pain, and stress in my day-to-day life; I know I can tolerate it. I know it will pass. My friendships with other swimmers have deepened. We are in this together.

Part of the wonder for me is having done hours of research and reading about cold water swimming and realising how little we understand about our bodies and particularly our minds. All of us with mental health issues and all the spectra of neurodiversity know how poorly understood our brains are.

We can explain the euphoria of the flood of hormones and chemicals in our bodies that bring the joy and the post-swim high, but each body is different. Each of my friends and others who have written about it have slightly different experiences. Some of them walk to knee or waist depth and quickly throw themselves into the water because for them a slow entry is torture. For me the shock is too much; I get in slowly so the numbness and pain advances up my body in a controlled way. I feel unsafe if it's too sudden, like my heart might stop from the shock of plunging in; I have shown that this isn't true, but it's not worth it to me. There are no good scientific explanations for how we all are so different.

For me that is a source of wonder and awe, which is the spiritual aspect of this discipline. As always it is being out in the natural world, joining bioluminescent beings in their element, feeling the absolute presence of my body in the ocean. And it is also the awareness of other beings, human and otherwise, how we can overcome our differences in a common setting.

Now that I'm at the end of the talk I realise that, as always, I have not presented clear answers. I have said I feel wonder even when I understand the science, and I have said that part of the wonder is the experience of things that science can't yet explain. Both are true. The pain and the joy of the cold ocean are both true. Part of our search for truth and meaning is knowing that we cannot explain everything and trusting that that is a critical part of our human experience.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

- Do you feel wonder differently if you understand more about what you are experiencing?
- Does understanding the science of how something works affect (help or hinder) your sense of awe?