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To cite this article: Emma Boocock (09 Jan 2024): Navigating grief: an autoethnographic tale of open water swimming and loss, Leisure Studies, DOI: [10.1080/02614367.2024.2302345](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2024.2302345)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2024.2302345>



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Published online: 09 Jan 2024.



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Navigating grief: an autoethnographic tale of open water swimming and loss

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show how using blue spaces has enabled the author to rebuild parts of herself again following the death of her father. Few studies have provided personal narratives of the influence and transformative nature of blue spaces, especially in association with grief. Through the use of autoethnographic writing, the author expands knowledge on how the immersion in bodies of water can be a therapeutic accretive practice which leads to palliative healing. The paper also contributes to the growing blue space literature, and how everyday encounters and liquid connections with this water world provides individuals with connection, belonging, and healing.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 March 2023
Accepted 2 January 2024

KEYWORDS



Autoethnography; grief;
open water swimming;
place; immersion;
therapeutic accretion

Introduction

Wednesday 5th June 2019. That's when my world stopped, when my Dad's heart stopped. I'd steamed ahead of him on our social ride with a group of others and made it to the bottom to wait. . . I waited and waited . . . anticipating the familiar glee on my Dad's face when he joined me at the bottom. But it didn't come; he didn't come, just someone else telling me that dad wasn't well. Grabbing my bike, I pedalled flat out, legs burning, my chest and throat tightening up the closer I got to seeing him there, on the floor. I dropped my bike and ran, knowing it would be quicker. I also knew, as I arrived, knelt by his head, and looked into his eyes, that he wasn't there; Dad was gone.

The vignette presented above provides a snapshot in time which changed my life forever. My world shattered, and I was left to put myself back together again. What follows is a personal narrative, which examines how blue spaces, and immersion therein, can play a significant role in navigating grief (Olive, 2021). Through autoethnographic writing I aim to extend previous work in blue space literature by explicitly acknowledging how the immersion in water enabled a grieving daughter to process profound grief, and show how swimming can be used as a therapeutic practice.

The process of writing has been painful, and I have lost count of the number of times I sat crying at my keyboard, recalling the memories I had kept buried deep inside. When my Dad died, my heart shattered, and my brain stopped working. For me, as an academic, this inability to think compounded my emotional crisis with an identity crisis beyond that acknowledged by Umberson (2003). I tried to get on with the mundane jobs, but I was an automaton, without much thought. I simply could not be the scholar, the friend, the partner, or the outdoor enthusiast I was before. I merely functioned. One of the few activities I actively sought out was open water swimming. Here, as you will read later, I started to find myself again. I started to feel. A year later I discovered autoethnographic and blue space literatures after engaging with several non-fiction titles. In

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particular, Ruth Fitzmaurice's account in 'I Found My Tribe' documented Ruth's relationship with the sea and the sea community. Ruth articulates how the sea helped her to make sense of her husband's diagnosis and life with motor neurone disease. A passage which really resonated with me was when Ruth was at 'her cove', and she blew kisses out to the sea to say thank you for helping her make sense of things out there (Fitzmaurice, 2017, p. 27). In a way, my immersion in water felt like this sometimes, and my brain began to think and engage again.

This paper aims to extend existing knowledge regarding the benefits of open water swimming, by developing a narrative which weaves personal experience with academic research, to better understand complex, painful issues, such as death and traumatic loss (Matthews, 2019). As is the nature of autoethnographic writing, swimming and writing became an entangled process. As both a process and product (Hughes & Pennington, 2016) this autoethnographic writing was truly painful at times, and simultaneously a cathartic, therapeutic means of making sense of how swimming has supported my journey through grief, in ways that have been transformative (Custer, 2014, 2022; Johnston, 2020). Such personal writing about grieving, positioned by some as self-absorbed navel-gazing (Poulos, 2020), may also move the reader (Kivinen, 2021). Indeed, responding to Holman Jones (2016) I have sought to write in a way that may compel others through 'intimate provocation' (p.781), and by offering insights into the cultural experience of open water swimming available only to the insider (Adams et al., 2015).

Committing these painful and also uplifting experiences to paper is personally exposing, in ways that may connect with some readers, though others may dismiss or judge me more harshly (Matthews, 2019). Nevertheless, Brennan and Letherby (2017) argue that weaving the personal and the social into our research 'is invaluable when researching and writing about such subjective and emotionally significant experiences' (p. 164), which I have found both grief and open water swimming to be. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to show how blue spaces may be used as a therapeutic tool in the navigation of the grieving process. While extant work examines the therapeutic power of autoethnography (e.g. Custer, 2022) to the author's knowledge, there are currently no autoethnographies which explicitly connect swimming and grief, thus providing a unique contribution to the grief and blue space literatures.

Immersion in blue space literature

According to a recent report published by Outdoor Swimmer the numbers of people finding their place in the water are expected to continue growing by between 10 and 20% each year, and the fastest growing demographic is women (Bates & Moles, 2022). Interestingly, as well as seeing a significant rise in swimming participation over the last 18 months, largely due to the closure of swimming pools during Covid19, specific blue practices have emerged as important topics of research (Britton, 2019; Evers, 2015; Foley & Kistemann, 2015; Wheaton et al., 2020). Blue practices which have been of interest to scholars over the past decade are sea swimming (Foley & Kistemann, 2015), freshwater swimming (Bates & Moles, 2022), surfing (Britton, 2019; Olive & Wheaton, 2021), and scuba diving (Straughan, 2012). Indeed, there is a growing body of literature which specifically seeks to understand how 'blue spaces', or water environments, operate as a therapeutic medium and how immersion in water influences our sense of well-being and self-connection (Bates & Moles, 2022; Britton & Foley, 2021; Foley & Kistemann, 2015; Throsby, 2013).

Therapeutic landscapes have been defined as, 'a geographic metaphor for aiding in the understanding of how the healing process works itself out in places (or in situations, locales, settings, milieus)' (Gesler, 1992, p. 743). The literature regarding blue spaces, places water as a central feature as a therapeutic landscape, with many documenting the restorative effects of water and the affective healing engagements that are encountered in blue spaces (Foley, 2017; Foley & Kistemann, 2015). As a therapeutic medium, research has suggested that the benefits of blue spaces may include elements of restorative pleasure where swimmers note coming out of the water a different person to when they entered (Murray & Fox, 2021; Throsby, 2013); a sharpening of awareness (Humberstone,

2011); creating a more positive view of your body (Denton & Aranda, 2020); and ultimately the transformation of one's mood over time (Foley, 2017). This transformation over time can be aligned to accretive practice which brings together the idea of an affective and emotional continuum with active/passive therapeutic geographies (Foley, 2017). In other words, the repeated immersion in water over time, helps to develop layers which build and support our wellbeing. Both the work by Straughan (2012) and Foley (2017) acknowledge that repeated 'short-term dipping' and longer-term immersion in blue spaces help to develop a resilient 'crust' which aids in sustaining and hardening an embodied lacquer of wellness. In other words, being in the water emplaces oneself outside the flow of everyday life, and allows us to press the reset button (Straughan, 2012). In their systematic review of blue space interventions for health and well-being, Britton et al. (2020) recognise that:

'there is much overlap between blue and green spaces, however, authors have argued that blue spaces offer very different sensory experiences and are used in different ways with different outcomes and benefits that are often overlooked and remain poorly understood' (p. 51).

Aligned with the sensory experiences of blue spaces, embodiment has become central to exploring 'how we feel – as well as think – through the body' (Davidson & Milligan, 2004, p. 523). To move towards an understanding of how the sensory experiences play an important role in our engagement with blue spaces, Gordon and Inglis (2009) articulate the senses we might encounter when stepping into blue spaces:

'We touch, we grab, we brush against a range of surfaces with our bare feet and hands. We hear sounds, muffled and echoing, soft and hard. We detect odours, natural and man-made. The quality of the light changes at each turn. Space and water, intimacy and anonymity we share with complete strangers; at once both part of a communal experience, yet locked within our own private worlds. And because each and every one of our senses is so powerfully assailed – whether we swim with vigour or simply splash for fun – our reactions to the qualities and faults of the building are that much more intensely felt'. (p. 16)

Here, Gordon and Inglis (2009) emulate the senses of hearing, feeling, tasting; all of which play an important role in how we relate with an activity. This also supports what Robert Macfarlane, in his patron statement for the Outdoor Swimming Society, describes as 'a desire for what might be termed "reconnection" that has emerged in recent years, and 'a yearning to recover a sense of how the natural world smells, tastes and sounds' (Macfarlane, 2008). Thus, not only do people want to connect with themselves, but also with the natural environment. Paying attention then to the sensory experience of exercise in blue spaces, has the potential to reveal its therapeutic possibilities for the (various, diverse, and individual) bodies who engage in it (Ward, 2017). Embodiment is a way of us making sense through our bodies, and then reaching for the right language to express those ideas (Ellingson, 2017). This way of knowing requires people to have awareness of all their senses, both internal and external (Ellingson, 2017), which immersion in water has been shown to enable (Foley, 2017; Foley & Kistemann, 2015).

Embodiment is weaved both explicitly and implicitly through scholars investigating the health and well-being implications of blue spaces. Notably, Karen Throsby's (2013) (auto)ethnographic account of becoming a marathon swimmer, starts to encapsulate how she began to connect language to the senses she was experiencing during this time. She records both the discomfort and the pleasure taken during this time, and how those embodied experiences transformed how both she and her body felt. Central to her paper is this idea of the shifting sensorium. Sensorium is the awareness of all our senses, not just the westernised five (prioritisation of vision and hearing) (Ellingson, 2017). Swimming allows for a movement beyond the five senses, and to argue that the 'mind is necessarily embodied and the senses mindful' (Howes, 2005, p. 7). Swimming, and the experience of swimming is 'characterised primarily by heightened kinaesthesia' (Throsby, 2013, p. 13) and subsequently a sensorial space opens for individuals to experience. Thus, swimmers not only start to change physically, but Throsby argues that swimming changes how the body *feels*.

An intriguing but under researched component of these embodied experiences, particularly in open and wild blue spaces, lies in individuals' sense of nothingness while in the water. For instance, Ward (2017) gathered individuals' embodied experiences of indoor lane swimming. Here, swimmers talked of the mindful act of swimming, and how the repetitive nature of their continuous strokes provided a peaceful and almost thoughtless state. Sprawson (2013) found similarly, suggesting that immersion in water takes the swimmer away from the actual process of training and into the mind where they are immersed in a 'continuous dream of a world under water' (2013, p. 17). In the context of grief, it remains to be seen if this sense of nothingness also arises from immersion in open bodies of water, and if this can take people away from the intensities of their own lives in ways that may be transformative for them (Straughan, 2012; Throsby, 2013).

Despite the contributions to our understanding of blue therapeutic spaces, there remains a dearth of literature which acknowledges deep, personal accounts of how individuals are affected by water, and how water can act as a therapeutic practice, especially in relation to grief. Indeed, Duff (2011) has called for a better understanding of these enabling places, with a keen focus on how embodied encounters in the water can have a healing affect. More recently Foley (2017) again echoed a call for further exploration into the relationships that people have with blue spaces. In response to these calls, this paper focuses on how blue spaces have acted as a therapeutic tool while moving through grief. By using autoethnography the aim is to show how my association with the water provided a catalyst for rebuilding my life after my dad had passed away. The memoirs, reflections, and analysis in this paper aim to explore my therapeutic connection to blue spaces, and how my grief changed over time.

'Swimming stretches my body beyond its earthly limits, helping to soothe every ache and caress every muscle. But it's also an inward journey, a time of quiet contemplation, when, encased in an element at once hostile and familiar, I find myself at peace' (Sherr, 2012, p. 5).

Autoethnography – writing through grief

Writing through traumatic experiences can offer individuals a way forward in coping with their experiences (Matthews, 2019; Phipps, 2018; Wyatt, 2010). Autoethnography facilitates this by allowing the sharing of rich descriptions between the personal and the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Strikingly Denzin (2014) refers to Mills and the sociological imagination to explain that each variation [of autoethnography] centres on a common theme, 'connections between personal troubles and public issues' (p. 31), reminding us that we are not the only ones to grieve and experience what we have experienced. As a method, autoethnography allows a personalised writing style for individuals to draw upon their lived experience to increase understanding regarding particular social phenomena (Preston, 2011). In this case memoirs were used to facilitate understanding of my relationship with open water swimming and grief. The memoirs in this paper are based on my own immersive and multisensory experience of open water swimming in the UK. These memories were retrospectively written over a period of twelve months, approximately 18 months after my father died. The process itself was not systematic or neat, but messy and emotional. It took time to compile and work through. Inspiration for writing this paper using memoirs was taken from Ruth Fitzmaurice and her book 'I Found my Tribe', which depicts her transformative memoir on finding solace through her husband's illness and death. Through absorbing other academic autoethnographic papers aligned to grief (Matthews, 2019; Phipps, 2018; Wyatt, 2010), I realised the individualised nature of this approach and the unique grieving experiences people encounter.

There are some key features which separate autoethnography from traditional ethnography. These are the visibility of self, engagement, strong reflexivity, vulnerability, and open-endedness (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Visibility of self refers to an authors' clear presence in their work and represents the essence of autoethnographic research and writing (Meneley & Young, 2005). My

memoirs presented in this paper expose some raw emotions which I often kept hidden from those closest to me. I have aimed to show readers how the water connected with all my senses and provide a visceral representation of how I was in those blue spaces. Strong reflexivity ‘entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others’ (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 73). As I wrote and swam, I reflected on my experiences, thought about my reactions to those experiences, and finally reflected on how those experiences could relate to others. Although on paper this sounds simple, it wasn’t. As Matthews (2019) attests, *true* reflection can feel incredibly draining and emotional (p.2). When I was initially writing my memoirs, I could write one sentence and then burst into tears. The memories overwhelming me and sinking me back into my heart shattering grief. However, as time went on, and I started to become more objective about connecting my experiences to the literature, the process became easier, and I could detach myself in order to make sense of this ordeal. Autoethnography examines insights about specific moments in time, open-ended possibilities rather than definitive conclusions. The narratives around autoethnography remain fluid and flexible, rather than fixed (Matthews, 2019). There will certainly be no end to the grieving for my Dad, and this paper does not attest to being a guide on how water can ‘fix’ you. My aim is to share this experience in the hope that others may benefit from it, which is a core aim of open-endedness within autoethnography (Bochner, 2013). Personal engagement in autoethnography is a medium through which deeper understanding is achieved and communicated (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Importantly for this paper, my personal knowledge of my experience had to be scrutinised as any other ‘usual’ line of inquiry would be. Accordingly, after writing my memoirs and exploring the literature, I sought out a critical friend who challenged and questioned the analysis of my experiences. This allowed for a greater level of scrutiny, but also a greater level of reflection not just of the self, but for how this work engages with others.

By using autoethnography then, I have chosen to share my experience of using open water swimming, as a therapeutic practice. Naturally, the process of swimming and writing has become an entangled process, however the aim of this personal story is to offer a new vantage point from which to make a unique contribution to social sciences (Laslett, 1999; Wall, 2008). By sharing my reflexive, vulnerable account of grief, my aim is to offer some insight into how natural spaces can reconnect us back to reality after personal trauma. How this paper will be presented is by positioning the lived experiences against the current literature, to examine the cultural significance of this experience. I am all too aware that everyone’s navigation of grief is different, and do not prescribe open water immersion as a panacea practice. But this is my story, a story of pain and hope.

Swimming location

For many, open water swimming can evoke images of nature, remote locations, crystal clear waters, waterfalls, and cold temperatures, however the realities are much less glamorous (Bates & Moles, 2022)! Certainly, the area where my regular swims were located were beautiful, but perhaps the venue associated with this paper could be described as less than desirable.

The North York Moors is an official Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the north of England. With a rich and diverse landscape of moor and farmland, the national park is also blessed with 26 miles of coast. However, this paper focuses on a venue 12 miles in-land from the North Sea at a local reservoir that is within walking distance of my front door. The venue itself is run by a water sports company and owned by a national water board. Facilities are limited and dated but do include a changing room and a club bar. Once a member of the water sports club, individuals can sail, paddleboard and kayak whenever they choose. However, swimming is much more formalised.

Swimming sessions are organised twice a week for two-hour slots. Safety kayaks are deployed, and specific rules and codes of conduct must be always obeyed by the swimmers. The reservoir often attracts 40–50 swimmers per session, providing individuals with immersion and connection in this blue space. It is important here to distinguish the difference between swimming in this place, a managed reservoir, and wild swimming. Open water swimming and wild swimming are used

interchangeably throughout articles, books and between people. For this context I would class this as open water swimming, simply because wild swimming is the means of swimming without supervision. This also opens a conversation about accessing and swimming in managed reservoirs, something which has been contested recently with the Kinder Reservoir Trespass in April 2023 (Pearson, 2023). Spaces such as these provide a valuable source of connection to blue spaces for people, however it is currently still illegal to swim in reservoirs and some rivers in England and Wales (Pearson, 2023). However, it is not within the scope of this article to tackle that debate. Simply, this context provided a safe open water swimming space for individuals of all abilities to access it.

Findings & discussion

The memoirs written in this piece are connected to this place and my experiences in it. Moving home after my dad's death, I was made aware of the regular swims on social media. Although I initially sought this space for a training ground for my triathlon hobby, this place became so much more and I began swimming twice a week during the summer months, as well as volunteering as a safety kayaker. What follows are a set of memoirs which aim to show how I experienced the water during the initial few months after my Dad's death. Through the process of swimming, writing, and becoming more attuned to the literature associated with blue spaces, three core themes emerged from my memoirs. The following memoirs, and associated sense making aim to show how swimming allowed me to feel anonymity and belonging in and to a community; how swimming became an accretive practice for my grief; and finally, how the blue space had a palliative affect, rather than actual healing of my grief.

Anonymity and belonging

I remember Dad saying that whenever someone dies, nothing else changes, life continues. He always had some wisdom to share, something intended to smooth, nourish, or soften my life's journey. He wasn't always right, of course. While normal life resumed for others following his unexpected death, those first few months felt like a blackout period for my mind. To this day I cannot recount what I did, who I spoke to, or any key moments - nothing at all. The one thing I can recount is taking up swimming at the local reservoir. Still shrouded in grief, my usual outgoing personality swamped by something I couldn't explain, I wasn't sure what I was even doing there. I suspect that I approached the registration area looking like a shadow of my former self: tentative, diminutive, and uncertain. But no one there could make that comparison, no one knew me. No one knew what trauma I was going through. No one knew anything. I was just another swimmer. Recent meetings with friends, work colleagues, and family had been dominated by grief, sadness, and empathy. Each unavoidably resurfaced that thing that I couldn't move beyond, like an inescapable baggage that I carried with me into every iteration of my established relationships. It weighed heavily, and it sat uncomfortably with my reputation as a strong, Yorkshire lass. I wasn't used to being regarded as weak, or sad, or to be felt sorry for. In contrast to this uncomfortable social reality, I carried no known baggage at the reservoir. I was just a new swimmer to them. Just someone else on their list. They attached no sadness or grief to me. It opened an alternate world to me, one where I wasn't defined by the sadness now associated with my everyday life. Here, I was unencumbered by other's knowing. I was, temporarily at least, shorn of the responsibilities, the expectations, and the conventions of being a mournful daughter, sister, friend, or colleague. I was anonymous, untethered, free. The water and that new community cleansed me. The feeling of sadness weaning only a little, but enough to make me feel like I had achieved something for me. After that night, a call was put out for volunteer safety kayakers. I immediately signed up without question.

Much of the literature to date speaks to how individuals who access the water enjoy the sense of community and belonging with others (e.g. Bates & Moles, 2022; Neal et al., 2019; Rishbeth et al., 2019). People note that the sharing and being together can and is more important than the actual swimming (Bates & Moles, 2022; Britton & Foley, 2021). However, the first few months of accessing swimming at this place was a different experience for me. I wanted to feel anonymous. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I didn't want anyone to know who I was or what

I was doing there. I just wanted to escape. Nevertheless, I unknowingly became part of this small community. My weekly swims and contributions to the safety kayak team forced me to engage with the cultural practices which were tied to this place, allowing me to have a sense of community and connection with others. From her experiences of outdoor swimming, Moles (2021) speaks directly to the cultural practices of spaces like this and the rituals of social activities that individuals negotiate in order to connect with the place and people. I engaged in the changing room chatter about water temperature and goose dropping; I laughed with and at others in the battle to wrestle the wetsuit on; I listened to the complaints of other safety volunteers. In essence I presented myself as an outdoor swimmer, in order to gain acknowledgement and approval from others in that space (Moles, 2021). This presentation of myself here gave me respite from the numbness that seeped into my everyday encounters as a grieving daughter. It made me feel like I was connected to something that was more than my everyday identity at the time. I started to feel like my identity as a fun-loving Yorkshire lass was returning.

The water, and its community, regardless of how much I engaged with individuals, placed a sense of belonging on my soul that I had not felt since my dad passed. This type of connection is acknowledged by Rishbeth et al. (2019), who state that 'feeling a sense of connection does not necessarily require interaction. Even experiences of "being alone" can be conceptualised differently in outdoor public contexts' (p. 129). Although Rishbeth's work focused on refugees' relationship with green spaces, similar sentiments for this paper can be derived from their work. When you are engaging with outdoor spaces, whether that be blue or green, there is a sense of connection to that place and the people regardless of whether you engage in conversation or not. Significantly then outdoor spaces hold the power to transform our feelings of connectedness with people and with places. This transformation is shown explicitly in the work of Caddick et al. (2015) in their work with surfing and veterans with PTSD. Similar to my own experience, engagement in surfing provided a therapeutic respite from their trauma which started to reshape their everyday lives. Bates and Moles (2022) identify this as 'embodied mutuality' and can be an 'ongoing process of becoming a community that alters people in visible and less visible ways, reorienting social and spatial practices through the support and friendship offered by swimmers in and around the water' (p. 10). Swimming therefore provides a space for enmity, which can be found by being there and participating, rather than in extended conversations (Bates & Moles, 2022; Rishbeth et al., 2019). Scholars acknowledge that our connections with and in the water can shape our identities, sense of belonging and place, and in turn impact our physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing (Brown & Humberstone, 2015; Brown & Peters, 2018; Olive & Wheaton, 2021). Significantly then, this paper adds to our knowledge of how nature based physical activities, can be an enabling mechanism to healing, by connecting people to communities and places, with swimming becoming the central accretive practice in this context.

Swimming as an accretive practice

Here, in free water, there remains, however distant, a faint hope of magic and of rebirth . . . We should, whenever we can, take to the wild for a swim. (Sheather, 2008)

During the iterative process of analysis, accretion, and its association with water, became a core theme which seemed to resonate with my memoirs. Accretion and the use of swimming as an accretive practice, can be classed as the growth or gradual accumulation of additional layers or matter (Foley, 2017). In reality, accretion in this context looked like what is described by Sheather (2008) and also my memoir below. The ability to feel again. The ability to look beyond the sadness of everyday life and almost start to live again. To rebuild the layers of my life.

The first head dunk is a shock. It felt freezing, and I tried to control my breathing and initial strokes to get my body used to it. Others had already fully submerged and were powering away around the course. I took a leisurely start to focus. To calm, and to centre myself in that moment. Although people talk about the water washing away emotions, I don't feel that. The water makes everything pause for a minute, especially in that first 5 minutes. You can think of nothing else other than the cold, the feel, the silkiness of the water right along your body. It took me a whole 500 m to find my rhythm. I am reminded why I come here. To pause my mind. To reconnect with who I am. I connect with nature, I feel my breathing, and I try to let go. Thoughts rush through my head once my rhythm is settled, but I don't focus on them for too long before the water overtakes again and I focus on my breathing, my stroke and where I'm going. As I stop after the second lap I take in the scene. Bliss. That's the word that came to mind. The water temperature was just right at that point. The sun glistened off the small ripples that sat on the water. I had everything I needed right there. Nature, water, me. As I looked towards Danby Beacon I thought of my Dad, if only for a passing moment. The sadness was there, and I felt the tears prickle. So I dove back in for another lap, feeling the burn in my arms this time. Occasionally I feel the water run down my back, through a gap in my neck. But after three laps, it's time to retreat. My hands are started to claw and feel the cold, and I know another lap wouldn't end with me feeling like I do right now. It's time to wrestle the wetsuit off and go back to reality, because in this moment, it feels like a dream. An escape. As I drive back to the farm, I feel lighter. Not happier, but lighter. The water providing me some solace once again.

Using this blue space as a therapeutic landscape became my escape, and a lifeline I didn't know I needed. The water provided a kinaesthetic awareness (Gould et al., 2021), and enabled me to *feel* again; feelings I had numbed out in the weeks and months after my dad's passing. Foley and Kistemann (2015) encapsulate blue spaces as 'health-enabling places and spaces, where water is at the centre of a range of environments with identifiable potential for the promotion of human wellbeing' (p. 158). At the centre of this is the therapeutic nature that these blue spaces provide. Although some scholars have called for a better understanding of health-enabling places and how they work (Duff, 2011), there is significant literature of late that starts to acknowledge and speak to the healing power of water, not just physically, but mentally (e.g. Britton & Foley, 2021; Denton & Aranda, 2020; Foley, 2017). A key enabler of this is emotion and place, and the meaningful affective nature of the two. The notion of place and its explicit links to wellbeing and health, has had increased attention over the last few years (Bates & Moles, 2022; Britton & Foley, 2021; Duff, 2012; Foley, 2017). Place has been acknowledged as an active subject in the role of enhancing health, and significant implications for the affect of therapeutic environments, such as blue spaces (Britton & Foley, 2021; Duff, 2012; Foley, 2017). During that initial grieving period, my emotions were numb. I had no space for feeling. Yet this blue space provided such a strong kinaesthetic engagement with my bodily feelings, that I couldn't hide from them any longer. Gould et al. (2021) describe such engagements as affective resonances which suggests that these watery environments provide an intensity of feeling, sensation, and emotion, which for the participants in their study led to strong connections with these natural places. Similarly, Rebecca Olive in her blog post (2021) reveals her kinaesthetic connections with water. She recounts the period when she lost her mother after a long illness and how the water made her face her emotions, and how that place became a significant part of acknowledging her grief and sadness. Olive describes how water doesn't wash away our feelings, but enhances them, 'For me, paddling out into the water doesn't wash my feelings away, so much as expose them to me in a way I can't avoid. If I'm happy, then that becomes amplified into joy. But if there is sadness or stress that I've been pretending isn't there, then it will expand in the water and I'll have to be honest with myself about those feelings' (Olive, 2021). Much to my own experience then, Olive felt that when she was in the water, explicitly showing how engagement in these spaces provides significant support for the people accessing it.

Not all my encounters with the water have been positive and allowed me to sink back into my life. There are times when the water is so rough, you get choked; times when you get kicked in the face by other swimmers with no retribution; times when all you want to do is add more water to the lake with your tears. But for me, most of the time, the water provided that escape from reality. Yes, it showed glimpses of the past (cycling up to Danby beacon with my father), but for the most part it allowed me to let my thoughts go. To let them flow behind me and not

catch me until I was back on dry land. *This* is what started to save me during those first few months of darkness. The place and the people. The memoir provided here then specifically extends our knowledge of how blue spaces provide a therapeutic accretion for individuals in need of it.

In making sense of this Foley's (2017) work on therapeutic accretion and how swimming is a central feature in sustaining our wellbeing, provides a way to conceptualise these encounters. Foley (2017) states:

Therapeutic accretion works in a similarly backwards and forwards way. If a resilient crust is built up with every swim we take, this helps sustain our health in a forward direction; yet the experience of the swim is also an echo backwards along the emotional continuum to an affective past where that deep initial layering took place. Putting these together, the fleeting event of the swim and the milieu in which it takes place, harden into a sort of embodied lacquer of wellness. (p. 45)

Essentially this layering up of body knowledge, memory, practice, and place encounters build to develop a resilient wellbeing, which in turn adds to our embodied experiences of blue spaces. Over time, regardless of how sporadic the encounters with these spaces might be, this adds a resilient layer to your wellbeing, much like what Olive (2021) also describes in her blog mentioned previously. Additionally, other scholars have suggested that both short- and long-term immersions in water can aid physical and mental wellbeing (Duff, 2010; Foley, 2017; Straughan, 2012). Either way, water has a unique power to evoke emotions, attachments, connections, and belongings in unpredictable ways (Watson, 2019). As Moles (2021) states in the opening paragraphs of her paper, swimming is an entangled practice between our bodies and the water, which can change form and meaning over time and place. Thus, what was significant in my experience was that water allowed a sense of connection, purpose, and healing that I had not welcomed previously, adding further evidence that blue spaces can and do provide therapeutic accretion for those that access it (Caddick et al., 2015; Foley, 2017).

Swimming as palliative rather than healing

It is important to identify to the reader that the water has not healed my grief. Four years on I still suffer the trauma of that day, and the subsequent aftermath of my father's death. I grieve for the things he will miss. I grieve for my previous carefree life. I still see the empty hole that he has left in our family lives, almost every day. So, while I have ensconced open water swimming as a therapeutic accretion, I acknowledge that the practice of swimming was one of palliative, rather than actual healing of my grief. In her writings of healing through grief in everyday places, Alette Willis (2009) draws our attention to the differences between palliation and healing. She describes palliation as a cloak, and something which dampens down the emotions and symptoms the individual is feeling (Willis, 2009). Healing, or to make whole, is something which requires transformation, either emotionally or physically (Willis, 2009). Palliation can happen immediately. For example, my own experiences of immersing myself in water for the first time after my father died is shown in the memoir below.

That first step into the water, on my first session, stays with me. The temperature was a balmy 17 degrees, but I still donned the wetsuit. Wading out to an appropriate place to fully submerge, I looked around. Focusing on others getting in and hearing the general positive, uplifting chatter about people's lives. I felt a wave of resentment. I hated that others were laughing and happy, and in my mind I had nothing but sadness and loneliness. As soon as I submerged and immersed myself, I could drown that out. I didn't have to hear it. All I could hear was my voice, telling me to breathe. Telling me to think about the timing of my breathing. That's all I wanted to focus on, not on the sadness that swirled around my brain. The water itself was calm, so to speak, with only a slight movement on the top. Stoke, stroke, breathe. Stroke, stroke, breath. Gradually getting into the rhythm and the stillness of my mind. Emerging from the water after a couple of laps, my heart felt a little lighter. The feeling of sadness weaning only a little, but enough to make me feel like I had achieved something for me.

The memoir aims to show the momentary respite in my emotional trauma at the time. Painful emotions, such as what I was experiencing, especially during those initial months, are disruptive to dominant emotional geographies (Hua, 2009; Willis, 2009). Other scholars, mainly those in surf therapy, have also attributed water based physical activity with the process of palliation or healing. As mentioned previously, Caddick et al. (2015) used surf therapy with veterans with PTSD and notably acknowledged that the water and surfing as an activity provided an important form of respite to those who were on the brink of suicide. Gibson and Frost (2019) have also written about how surfing and ocean-based death rituals have provided surfers with an emotional transformational experience which creates and renews bonds between themselves, others and the sea. The connection between blue spaces and palliation is significant to moving beyond our existing knowledge of how nature-based activities can support those who have suffered trauma, whether that be physical, mental or emotional trauma. This paper therefore shows a novel insight into how open water swimming has provided palliation for the grieving process, and how engaging in swimming or blue spaces more broadly might support others in the future.

Concluding Thoughts

The core aim of this paper was to show how blue spaces may be used as a therapeutic tool to help individuals navigate grief. Through the use of autoethnography the aim was to show how water has acted as a catalyst for rebuilding my life after my dad had died. This paper contributes to the leisure literature by providing a novel and unique autoethnographic account of how blue spaces can be used to support people experiencing grief. Beyond the immediate advantages of accessing water for health and wellbeing, which has started to become more documented within the literature (e.g. Britton et al., 2020), this paper specifically goes beyond that by providing further evidence that water can provide therapeutic accretion (Foley, 2017). My experience, and those of others who have lived through heart shattering grief (e.g. Olive, 2021), show the ability to gain connection and community through anonymity in these blue spaces. The nature of being in the water either alone or with others provides the connection to people and places which start to rebuild our layers that have been lost (e.g. Caddick et al., 2015). Despite not attesting to being healed by water, this paper significantly contributes to our understanding about how natural spaces, specifically blue spaces, can make us feel both physically and mentally.

Naturally, the process of writing and swimming became an entangled process, and writing about my swimming practices offered a unique way to process my experiences. It allowed me to express my emotions before, during and after swimming, and allowed me to make sense of my grieving and how swimming navigated that journey for me. I could not talk about my grief in the initial couple of years, the emotions being too raw, and the embarrassment of crying on someone's shoulder too hard to bear. As Matthews (2019) and other grief writers have attested to, autoethnography provides an important method for addressing difficult issues, such as grief. Autoethnographic writing provides an important sense-making opportunity, which other methodological approaches cannot reach, and allows individuals a method to voice their pain without necessarily speaking. Ochs and Capps (2001: 258–259) suggest that developing a coherent narrative may be the most important factor in achieving healing by those who have suffered trauma. Subsequently, this narrative has provided a new story about grief. One which used swimming as a means for restoration and respite. One which opens the door for others to make sense of the cyclitic, traumatic, journey of grief. Painful emotions have the potential to bring about lasting changes in our lives, and being able to bear witness to pain offers us an opportunity to bring about lasting changes in our relationships with places and people (Willis, 2009). Therefore, this piece offers others a way to explore and connect with their grief more purposefully. This paper specifically supports others who have called for more academic research which weaves personal experiences with scholarship (Matthews, 2019). Importantly for the leisure community, writing, and more specifically autoethnography, offers a novel way to make sense of and connect with our embodied nature practices.

There is considerable scope to develop future work which documents our embodied and entangled relationships with blue spaces. Specifically, there is a need to determine the materiality of the water and what meaning it holds for people (Moles, 2021). This paper provided a very personal and specific association to the water with the death of my father, however by extending our knowledge in this area we will better understand how these spaces can be shared and used by others. Furthermore, by starting to use more innovative methodologies for our research practices (e.g. Swim-along interview, Denton et al. (2021)), to capture the in-situ experiences of people and places, we can start to go beyond traditional reflexive accounts of swimming and capture the more-than-emotional geographies which adds depth and meaning to our research (Bates & Moles, 2023; Foley, 2017).

Finally, swimming has been central to this process, and engaging with the blue space literature has allowed a deeper sense of reflection and connection which I didn't know existed. It has given me purpose and allowed me to connect to others who have similarly been affected by grief. More than that it has also expanded our discussion of using swimming and blue spaces more broadly, as a therapeutic tool. I will not attest to being healed from the practice of swimming, or in fact the process of writing this narrative, but it has allowed for a transformation in my thinking towards grief, trauma, and the use of swimming as an accretive practice on the long journey of grieving. This is not a story of healing, but one of continued hope.

As long as I kept moving, my grief streamed out behind me like a swimmer's long hair in water. I knew the weight was there but it didn't touch me. Only when I stopped did the slick, dark stuff of it come floating around my face, catching my arms and throat till I began to drown. So I just didn't stop (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 187)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Edward Hall for his thoughtful comments and support in writing this piece.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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