

Blue Marbles, Blue Mind: How water saves us all

"There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' The two young fish swim on for a bit. Eventually, one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the heck is water?'"

Sometimes we cannot see the forest for the trees – or water either, for that matter. And awareness is a mindful thing – how do we cultivate it?

Blue Mind: The Surprising Science that Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better At What You Do by Wallace J. Nichols is a fantastic book about all aspects of water and how we are nurtured by it, emotionally, physically and at a surprisingly deep



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neurological level as well.

Nichols begins his book describing the moment he is standing on a pier in the Outer Banks of North Carolina, 50' feet above the ocean, about ready to jump while wearing a "bejeweled swim cap" bedecked with long black snakes of cable running down his back – a lab rat about to measure the brain's response to the ocean. The cap is a "nerve center," a mobile electro-

encephalogram (EEG) unit, invented by Dr. Stephen Sands, a biomedical expert examining the behavioral and neurophysiological data that tracks the brain's response to advertising.

American anthropologist Loren Eiseley said: "If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water." Eiseley once described human beings as "a way that water has of going about, beyond the reach of rivers."

In fact, the earth is 70 percent covered in water, 95 percent of those waters as yet undiscovered, and 80 percent of the world's population lives within 60 miles of the coastline of an ocean, lake or river. Why? Because to human beings, water is "home." We spend nine months suspended in water before birth. At birth, our bodies are 78 percent water; the human brain is

80 percent water.

Nichols: "It is time to drop the old notions of separation between emotion and science... Just as rivers join on their way to the ocean, to understand Blue Mind we need to draw together separate streams: analysis and affection; elation and experimentation; head and heart... today cognitive neuroscientists have begun to understand how emotions drive virtually every decision we make."

As Rick Hanson writes in *Hardwiring Happiness*, "The brain takes its shape from what the mind rests upon." We actually strengthen the happiness neural pathways – that is, make it easier for us to feel positive emotions – by choosing positive experiences. In terms of a happiness quotient, happiness is 50 percent genetic disposition, 10 percent life circumstances; and

40 percent what we pay attention to – shaped by the meaningful activities we voluntarily choose. Research shows that sustainable happiness is connected to a sense of place, and overwhelmingly people record being happier in nature, and preferably near water.

While brain research has determined that we build "perceptual maps" based upon our sensory experiences, urbanization and technology do not match our anthropology. Nichols: "Neon signs are beautiful, cell phones are useful, subways are efficient and crowds spilling out into the paved streets have a powerful appeal. But such commotions are the wrong key to a lock installed by evolution – and even those amidst the skyscrapers know it without knowing it."