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On the Beach

An Uplifting Experience to Say the Least

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Life is like a beach.

When I was just a kid, my mother took me to Judo lessons at the Police and Citizens Youth Club. I had a tough time at school and she thought it was important that I learn to defend

myself, and this judo was a good way of doing this. Most of judo is learning how to throw people who attack you. Because you practise in partners you get thrown quite often. One night I fell the wrong way on my foot. I was in agony and I had to be taken home. Shortly after I came down with suspected glandular fever (turned out to be mumps), followed by appendicitis. I never "got back in the saddle" - I lost the confidence to continue the course, and never went back.

For the next three years I attended church services come rain or shine, sang hymns and listened to what they had to say. I didn't believe a word of it.

Now it's almost thirty years later and I'm in my second year of transition. I determined at the start of this that it would have to be an emotional and spiritual transition as well as a physical and social one. I've been dealing with a lot of buried hurt and pain, sorting it out and letting go. I feel that I had a lost childhood, one where I never really could express who I was or be genuinely happy in being me. I'm currently finishing a co-dependency course. The two major relationships that I've had in my life may not have started out as disasters, but they surely ended up as such. I'm keen not to repeat this a third time, and seek to be a more loving, intimate and fulfilled person. It's hard work requiring effort and persistence. But what else is new? Life goes on.

A weekend back in November was one of the most enjoyable and enlightening for me since the start of transition. On Friday night I enjoyed a body massage, a film, and dancing at a nightclub. The latter was a first for me, and I found it great fun. On the Saturday, one of my ex-girlfriends shouted me to a "Healthy Living" seminar run by the local vegetarian society. As it happened the seminar made numerous references to natural oestrogen production. One of the speakers gave a quote from Jan Morris, and another was promoting substances (such as Soya beans) that reduce the risk of breast and prostate cancer - both of which I hope to avoid. Then on Sunday I went to church followed by a trip to the beach.

I'm not even a Christian, let alone a church goer. Technically I was raised as a Methodist, but my parents never went to church or discussed their beliefs at all. When I was in my early teens they were convinced by a lay preacher that it would do me a power of good to go to church every Sunday. I remember the first time that I was taken to church by this preacher. We walked through Toohey Park and I followed close behind him and watched while he dropped pamphlets on the grass. I thought that he was being careless, and carefully picket up each one, handing them back to him with a smile when we got to church. He was less than happy with me.

For the next three years I attended church services come rain or shine, sang hymns and listened to what they had to say. I didn't believe a word of it. I wouldn't have minded that much, but I never understood why they sent me to a Church of Christ church, and not a Methodist one! What I heard described a jealous god who demanded love and obedience from his followers, and would not tolerate variation and difference in his people. Why, I thought, would I ever want to worship such a being? After the three years I left, never to return until a Sunday last November.

My friends Bird and Douglas in Queensland had suggested that I try going to the Unity Church. Not because of any divine reason, but because they promoted positive outlooks, personal development and prosperity. These seemed selfless enough reasons to go, and at the worst I would have wasted a morning. I was pleasantly surprised. The service had the same format that I remembered, alternating between song, sermon and prayer; with a voluntary collection and tea and a chat afterwards. No surprises there.

What did surprise me was the content. What was preached was not conformity but an arbitrary set of rules. Instead, there was a message of love, acceptance, positive change and practical steps for fulfilling one's potential. Here were folks willing to accept me without conditions, and ready to practise what they preached. I won't bore you with further details, but several times during the service I wept, overcome with emotion. I'm a cynical bitch - I study fringe science and religions as one of my hobbies - but this service did something that none of the others had. It reached me.

It was an uplifting experience to say the least. Don't take my word for it, check it out yourself. Afterwards I rode my bicycle down to

Swanbourne Beach. I had originally planned to change in the dunes and go for a swim but I changed my plans. I walked down to the nudist part of the beach, stripped off to my panties, and jumped in the surf. The panties and my bumble bee ear studs were the only things I wore while I played in the sea. I hadn't been down to the nudist beach to swim for over two years, well before I started my transition. I loved the sheer fun of frolicking on the beach. Ever since starting hormone replacement therapy though, I'd felt self-conscious about presenting my body. How do you reconcile having female breasts and male genitalia on a nudist beach?

But I was here now and having fun. I took off my spectacles and so couldn't see if anyone noticed or made comments. And I didn't care either - I was enjoying myself. I felt creative, carefree and happy. I got to thinking while I was playing how what I was doing was like a metaphor for life. Nothing original here, people have suggested this before, but this was my inspiration and revelation. Probably the influence of going to church. And this is what I thought - Life is like a beach.

These thoughts came back to me in late December. My friend Cheryl was here on holidays before going to London, and we're on a beach at Mandurah. I'm frolicking in three foot of surf while she stands up on her knees, afraid to get her wig wet (she's only just come-out). This is the eye of the storm for me, I'm off work on stress leave because the job I loved is being wound up and I'm being retrained to do work I hate. I'm moving out of where I live in a few weeks time and everything goes into storage while I visit Sydney. I might not be back. And once again I think life is a beach.

There are many different ways of going to the beach. Some people drive down and eat fish and chips, safe in their cars. Others venture out and just sunbake on the sand or walk along the shore. Others play just at the sea's edge, risking a foot or two at the water. Still others jump in, swimming and playing and having fun. Everyone has a different style of swimming, and moves at their own pace. The ocean is a treacherous environment. There are rip tides and under currents that will drag you down to the shore or out to sea. How you cope with these is up to you.

As the waves come breaking in, you can march out defiantly, bracing yourself for when it hits. But do this, and you will probably get hit in the stomach and get dumped on the shore. Or, you can float, go with the current, applying energy and effort when needed and relaxing when you can. The waves are more fun then as you ride their crests and troughs. And this is like learning to fall in judo. It's not just a matter of being tough and enduring, but of being flexible and going with the flow.

You might be a good swimmer, but things are made easier if you can increase your buoyancy. And what is this buoyancy, to extend the metaphor further? To me it's faith and soul. Keep it positive in a practical way, and you'll get much further in realising who you are. Why practical? Because if it's not practical it doesn't work. And if it doesn't work, if you lose faith in yourself, you sink to the bottom.

So I'm going with the flow, going to Sydney rather than going mad with stress. Whether or not it's an ebb or riptide, I don't know. Only time will tell. But I'm going where I have to, letting the current take me with it.

At this point you're probably thinking that I've mixed my metaphors horribly and flogged them to death. Maybe so. Perhaps life is like a Monty Python sketch and you're sentenced to "be hung until you cheer up". Laugh it off and you're okay; but take it too seriously, and you'll wind up much worse, never realising what you can become. And realising who you are, being happy, fulfilling your potential, is the name of the game.

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