



# OCEANS WITHIN

by Lisa Denning

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They slow down and make a complete circle around me, never breaking our eye contact. The baby rolls over playfully and circles me once more before returning to her mother's side. The two slowly, almost motionlessly, glide away into the blue.

Becoming more aware of my physical body again I feel my heart pounding, excited and filled with so much love. They are family to me and I always long to be with them. I thank them for coming again as I watch their spouts head farther and farther out into the ocean.

The Ocean is my home, my real home. It is where I feel most whole and most alive. I learned

Waking suddenly, I am called out to the edge of the water. Feeling that familiar pull I gather my fins and mask, and walk to the water's edge. The sun has not yet come up over the mountain and the bay still appears quiet. Yet I know this feeling that I have inside. I know what awaits me and who is calling. I enter the water, enjoying that initial feeling of the silky saltwater surrounding my body.

I instantly feel more alive and connected. I slowly begin swimming out from the house and the water gets deeper and deeper, bluer and bluer. I close my eyes, continue to swim where my body is being led. Stopping about a quarter of a mile off shore I roll onto my back. The ocean supports me, holds me up as I float and enjoy the early morning light sneaking up over the mountain.

Not more than a minute later I get a strong feeling to look below. I do and there I see a baby whale slowly approaching. Following closely behind is her mother. Both swim just below the surface. As they come within a couple of feet I am eye to eye with both the baby and mother. Stillness and expansion in the same moment.

to swim at a young age after watching my sister have a lesson and then spent as much time in the water as possible. The freedom of movement I experienced in my body felt so incredible and beyond all limits. Even then it felt more natural for me to be in the water and underwater. Weightless and free. Floating on my back for as long as I could and gazing up at the sky, I would feel all of my worries slowly disappear as the ocean held me in her arms. Nothing else mattered and I was completely at peace.

Yet it wasn't until I was much older that I truly came to realize the power of the ocean — the healing power — physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

During my latter years of high school I went through an intense experience with an eating disorder that nearly ended my life. I withdrew completely from anything and everything that I loved and focused only on food and losing weight. It was my entire world for several years as I withdrew more and more. Everything else became too much to deal with and eventually fell away, including swimming.

Losing weight, not feeling, avoiding and hating my body, was all I knew. I became lost inside and did not understand how I could ever get out of it. I wanted to disappear and I was, slowly. Everything else seemed too painful.

Yet something inside never really let me give up. I went through inpatient treatment programs on three separate occasions with the last one enduring for almost six months. My counselors decided that I needed to leave New Orleans where I grew up and was sent to a residential treatment center in Florida, not too far from the ocean.

After a while when I had some free time I would drive to the beach and stare out at the water. The emotions would be overwhelming for me there. It was a combination of sadness and longing. I missed being in the water and longed to have that feeling again inside of me. Where had it gone?

Yet I still could not imagine wearing a bathing suit again and it went against all of the rules in my head about being seen in my body. I was frustrated that this eating disorder had taken so much from me and I slowly began realizing just how much.

The ocean was calling me again.

I decided to stay in Florida near the beach after being released from the hospital and slowly began rebuilding my life. I spent a lot of time at the beach and near the water yet would not allow myself the freedom of swimming. Then one day while flipping through a local paper I saw an advertisement for a weekend retreat that included a swim with dolphins. My whole body lit up and I felt a surge of energy run through me. I had been drawn to dolphins since birth and was always eager to be close to them. I had been in the water with them once before and always dreamed of being with them again. I knew I had to do this.

Then in that same moment another voice told me that I really couldn't because I would have to be seen in a bathing suit and that wasn't okay yet. The battle inside grew but I knew that there was no way I could miss this. I had to be there. It was my dream.



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A couple of months later when the moment arrived for me to enter the water I was almost in tears. Lowering myself off of the dock, I felt the cool salty water surround and support me. My body was so happy, and at the same time I was so wrapped up in the dolphins that I didn't even realize it. Right after I got in and swam over to the side, one dolphin came directly to me, stopped and looked at me. He gazed into me and in that moment my entire life shifted. I was completely present and it was the first time I could ever remember that my mind was still. I was overwhelmed with love and a gentle sense of internal peace that I didn't know was possible. It was the first real physical "feeling" — proof I had that I could feel better and that I didn't have to live the way I had been living every day.

We then broke our eye contact and dove to the bottom together. We played together until it was time for me to get out of the water. Getting out I sat on the side of the dock just staring into the water, watching them move and play. I felt alive again.

Driving home, I felt a spark inside that had not been there before. I wanted to find out more about what had happened to me in the water that day with the dolphins. And I wanted more of it.

After some research, I found out about a bay where people could swim from the beach to be with a pod of wild dolphins on a daily basis. That was all I needed to hear and a few months later I made the decision to move there, to Hawai'i. I knew no one there, nor what I would do once I got there. I just knew I needed to go. The pull was too strong not to listen.

The morning after I arrived on the island I got up early and drove to the bay. The water was calm and light was just beginning to shine. I sat there for a few minutes before seeing the first splash. I felt like a little kid the way I was jumping with excitement. They were coming in, closer and closer. The ocean was so gorgeous and inviting. I could hardly believe I was there.

I quickly put on my gear and started swimming toward them. I could hear their sounds getting louder and louder as they were also swimming in towards me. Finally, looking to my right, I saw a group of five dolphins nearing. I dove down to meet them as they came spiraling up all around me.

I was home again.

I began swimming every morning with them. Through the combination of being with them and their amazing sounds, and just being in the ocean, a whole other layer of healing began to unfold for me. I slowly broke free of the jail I had created internally for myself as well as physically in my body. In the water I moved freely again, learning to let go and play. I was breathing better and more fully. I was moving through fears, learning to trust and to feel love again, all in the ocean.

I learned things while in the ocean that I was not able to experience and learn on land. Everything shifts immediately when I enter the ocean as I am able to connect with myself and the world around me in a much different way.

Realizing what powerful experiences were possible I began working with others and assisting them into the water to be with the dolphins and also to work through their fears of the ocean. It is amazing what we hold in our bodies and how easy it can be to release it when we are in a safe, supportive space. For me, that has been in the water.

The experiences I have had with others in the ocean, including all of the dolphins and whales, have opened me more and more to the truth of who I really am.



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The Ocean and all of the beings that live within her have so much to teach us when we take the time to listen and to feel.