

The Certainty of Pressure

*Dr Ans Vercammen
Dan Simpson*

0.

We emerged from the water.
Is that why so many of us are drawn to it?

Sea level = one atmosphere.

1.

We are constantly under pressure
one unit of atmosphere is the average weight
of a column of air measured from sea level
to the top of the planet's exosphere.

On land, on a still day
you cannot feel the air around you
but the ocean:
the ocean hugs you.

8.3 feet = 1.24 atmospheres

2.

When I am anxious, or stressed, or overworked
my head is full of pressure.

It's like the air inside my skin has expanded
and I can feel the blood rushing through the capillaries pressed against my skull
with a bass line: a deep, slow pulse of
womp... womp... womp.

The atmosphere in my body changes
and my world seems to shrink
to a small space inside my head
everything seems to exist
just behind my eyes.

It becomes hard to see the bigger picture:
I turn inwards
and everything becomes about:
me.

20.5 feet = 1.61 atmospheres

3.

Every thirty-three you dive deeper
results in another atmosphere of pressure:
the weight of everything held above
pressing against you.

The ocean will not allow a single mistake.
It will punish me for my hubris.
Yet this notion that I am small

a cog in the ancient machinery of life
is somehow reassuring.

I am put in my place
and reminded of who I am.

29.6 feet = 1.88 atmospheres

4.

I can feel it
cooling my skin
bubbles brush my face
rising up to the surface –
breathing is louder here
or maybe everything else is quieter.

More aware of my own body
my own lungs: I breathe slowly.
Every exhale feels like a disruption.

I often worry about worrying
all stressy over how to avoid stress
get anxiety about feeling anxious:
often these feelings are deeper
than the thing I'm focussed on.

I suppose there's a psychological return
to more powerless times
childhood, or traumatic experiences
the stuff we've spent years swimming around
those depths of ourselves we have to dive into
to understand better.

46.1 feet = 2.36 atmospheres

5.

It's not a choice to feel overwhelming pressure –
still waters run deep, they say:
hidden currents can grab you
and sweep you away in a sudden torrent
before you've had a chance to brace yourself
get a grip on a convenient handhold
or even understand what's happening.

Sometimes, when I get cold or tired on a dive
my little bodily discomforts
I feel a disquieting sense of claustrophobia
reminding me that I am a guest here.

It does not take much to draw me out again
out of my own head
find some buoyancy in this mysterious world.

57.7 feet = 2.71 atmospheres

6.

The pressure I feel is both internal and external
simultaneously:
the weight of whatever it is that's causing it
and my own heartbeat in response.

Everything is slower underwater.
The ocean reconnects me with my vulnerability as a human –
with my place in the universe.
I am just one tiny creature in a vast sea
where other apex predators rule.

My life in the ocean
has defined my life on land.
I'm taken out of the safety of my terrestrial home
and cast into the wild.

I am just here to watch.
To marvel, really.
This place feels at once foreign
and familiar.
I find freedom in letting go of who I am not.
It beckons.
It soothes.
It is my meditation.

75.1 feet = 3.22 atmospheres

7.

Is that why so many of us are drawn to it?
We emerged from the water.