

The Bathtub

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Abstract

What is the lived experience of bathing in someone else's tub? Why would this experience be dissimilar to bathing in your own tub? This essay examines the nuances of bathing elsewhere, focusing on intimacy, place, ritual, and time.

Keywords: *intimacy, place, ritual, time, tubs*

I sink into the bath, luxuriating in the heat. Filled to the brim with hot water and bubbles, my tub invites me to linger, empty and refill it with still hotter water, read books, daydream, plot, and scheme. I perform a ritual of cleanliness. I allot time. I run the water. I adjust the temperature. I add bubbles. I add scent. I clean my body. Like wiping a slate clean, I also clean my mind, letting thoughts evaporate with the steam that rises from the surface of the water. I watch my fingers wrinkle. These moments are slow, idle, languorous. There is no hurry. There are few cares.

My bathtub is a behemoth: a six-foot iron monstrosity with clunky green legs. Original to the house, its sloped back and steep, smooth sides accept my body unquestioningly. The creamy enamel inside glistens where water splashes and drips slowly across its surface. My cat comes and sidles up to where the curve of the tub nears the floor. As I reach out to pet her, I also feel the radiant heat emanating from the side of the tub. Her old bones and mine are grateful for the warmth. I stretch out, dangle my right foot over the edge so I don't get *too* hot and gaze at the tree outside the window. Slippery, like my body against the tub, my thoughts slide away. Absently, I note how from this vantage point, seasons are marked by the presence or absence of foliage. This passage of time is slower than the one I mark lying here, ensconced in my tub for my pilfered moments of relaxation.

Prior to renovating and re-insulating our home, the tub was mercurial in its temperature. Its enamel surface absorbed and retained whatever temperature it came into contact with. If it was winter outside, the outside wall was cold, and so the tub was cold, and the water tepid. Then the tub frustrated, disappointed even. The anticipated moments of relaxing body and brain fizzled out like rapidly dissipating bubbles. Hurriedly, I would soap up, rinse off, and get out, peeved at the truncated pleasure.

If it were summer, the tub might be warmer, so the water might be warmer, but there was no guarantee. Coming in from a summer's rainy day, hoping to luxuriate in the liquid warmth was chancy, since our leviathan tub was capricious. I developed strategies to minimize the disappointment I felt when my bath experience did not meet my expectation. I did dishes to pre-heat the water. I washed clothes. I ran a skiff of hot water in the tub to prime it, heating it ever so slightly in an effort to have it accept and retain still hotter water. But more often than not, the tub would only offer a dreary tepid bath. During those previous baths, I dreamt of how insulation might rectify the fickle nature of the tub since no longer would the temperature outside determine my bathing pleasure.

Lazily, I turn the tap on with my left foot, adding more hot water. I think back to when we wrestled the tub out of the room and subdued it at the foot of our bed to await refurbishing. The giant tub languished in our bedroom for weeks; beached and disconnected from its purpose. With our bathroom completely dismantled, we used our kitchen sink for sponge baths, which in other times and places have been called either a *Katzenwäsche* or a whore's bath. If we weren't standing awkwardly on a towel playing "Little House on the Prairie," we might beg a shower at a friend's house or sidle awkwardly into the showers at the pool or gym.

Unmoored from plumbing at home we joined the ranks of the invisible homeless, cadging cleanliness as we could, where we could. However, I began to miss the full immersive warmth of the hot water, the crackle of the soapy bubbles, the quiet moments of relaxation: a kind of therapy for both my mind and my muscles. After several bath-less months, I decided, after great deliberation, to call a friend and ask if I could have a *real* bath at her home. I planned my evening carefully. I intended to linger, wallow even, in water as deep and hot as I could get it and revel in not sharing the change room with the arc of humanity at the pool. I would delight in my unabashed use of a bath, where no one might speculate on my habitation or habits. I had no fear I would raise suspicions about standing at one shower nozzle too long or come to the pool for too many days in a row. Nor was there any foreboding about warts or athlete's foot. I did not have to wonder why that woman was shaving every hair she could reach without removing her bathing suit. I could just glory in the blue oasis of my friend's bathroom.

And yet. The experience, as glorious as it was, was simultaneously very awkward. I wallowed. It was hot. No one was there with me. Still, beyond the warm steamy air and tiled walls I could make out the muffled sounds of my friend talking or moving about in the kitchen below, reminding me I was in someone else's space. Thoroughly clean but somewhat discombobulated, I got out reluctantly, dried off, and spent time with my friend commensurate to the time I spent in her lovely greeny-blue bathtub. Then I went back to my bathtub-less home.

My discombobulated feelings made me question what it was about this thing, this bathtub that disquieted me? Particularly when, prior to using her tub, I was confident the experience would be similar to bathing in my own home. I am not a stranger to my friend. Might have strangeness made using her bathtub easier? I *have* bathed in hotels. But her home is not a hotel with anonymous, uncomfortable tubs that are too short or too bright. I trust my friend to have a clean bathroom, but I also trust society to have conventions around cleanliness with which I am comfortable when I am at pools and gyms. At what other points or during what other uses does a bathtub carry different emotional weight? How come using my friend's tub was strange and disquieting? Was it the tub or the experience that was an unexpected surprise?

The Nature of Tubs

My tub and my friend's tub have similarities. Her tub is deep and laid around with the accoutrements of personal hygiene. The room is nicely decorated, her tub clean. Like the tub to which I am presently adding more hot water, my friend's tub is in a separate room housing both a sink and a toilet, each of which I've used previously, with nary a concern. At my friend's house I fiddle with the temperature controls whereas at home, unthinkingly, I twist the hot on fully, leaving the cold to last, only to temper the water. Ultimately the water ended up the same temperature. Beyond the whimsy of the taps, there are more commonalities: my tub is made of iron coated with enamel. Her tub is of steel coated with enamel. My tub has a stopper, a drain and an edge. So too, hers. Both tubs have shower toggles, faucets and a shower curtain. Both tubs are connected to a source of water as well as a method of disposing of that water. In fact, the water that I turn on and off with such pleasure using my toes *is* indistinguishable from water available to me at my friend's house, connected as it is to the same overarching water system. But is a bathtub a bathtub in any circumstance?

Location, Location, Location

Could it be the location? Is a bathtub a bathtub at Home Depot? Tubs are, like Heidegger's jug, vessels in which the "thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 167). The void – the space for my body – cannot be easily tested in the store. Instead I must trust the ephemeral sense of the experience I wish to create when in my bathroom. Onto that ephemeral sense cleaves other meanings: aesthetics, balm, healing, succour. My friend's bathroom was designed with her aesthetics, and while her aesthetic is not mine, each is pleasing. I pet bubbles until they pop under my finger, and think of other places, other tubs, and wonder if the location was really the issue.

I remember my mother's stories of her childhood tub, which was not fixed to a plumbing system. Instead they filled a large galvanized container in the kitchen and took turns washing by the flickering light and heat of the stove. The water was carried in from the well and each person in the family bathed in the same tub, the same water. My mother relished being clean, but the tub was not a place for lingering. It was moveable; its presence fleeting, like its use. Current North American conventions around bathtubs fix them in a separate room, often located in a more private part of the house. My friend's tub meets this convention. I went to a more private part of her house, closed the door, ran the water to the right depth and temperature then climbed in, as I do in my own home. If I, as an adult, were bathing in the tub at my childhood home, would that experience be different? Would my years away from that tub render it discombobulating as well, or would I return to my childhood comforts seamlessly, tub included? The bright, short hotel room tubs do not invite me to linger as my own tub does, but do not disquiet me as my friend's tub did. Perhaps this is because I set up a 'home base' or a home away from home in that hotel.

Slipping onto my tummy, I stare nearsightedly at water sloshing against the enamel and think back to standing in Home Depot, visualizing the bathroom into which we would place our vessel as we pick flooring, paint, and fixtures: all of which simultaneously define and create our sense of self. A sense of us laid bare to everyone who comes to our house and uses our bathroom. These things, this vessel, disclose a world, become a part of me; define who I am and what I can do (Heidegger, 1971). We built who we are and what we can do into our bathroom

with the choice and placement of our enamelled leviathan. Consequently we disclose ourselves to everyone who uses our bathroom for other, non-bathing reasons.

A Rose is a Rose is a Rose...

Do the things put into a tub define it? Heidegger (1971) puts water, wine, man, and gods into his jug, each one of the fourfold flowing seamlessly into the other. In the end, he still has a jug, but he has envisioned a process that conditions us to its use. Reminiscent of these unusual companions in a jug, my mother put things in our bathtub for any number of reasons: to store her taxidermy projects; to introduce ducklings to my sister and me. It is also where I put my cat to soothe her burns when I spilt boiling water on her. Heidegger's jug was ready-to-hand for the fourfold, as our tub was ready-to-body for projects, ducks, and cats.

These different uses and different beings in the tub do not change the aspect of the tub. Instead each different use discloses a different world – a world where tubs become containers or repositories bound by how we see them, conditioning us to their use. While the tubs did not hold Heidegger's god, nor wine, nor man, they were voids in which to put things - things perfect for small children, a gaggle of ducklings, a considerable amount of ice and a dead bear head, or a severely burned cat. The things inside the tub do not define it. It is a tub, regardless of its contents.

One Size Fits All

Does the number of people in the tub define its aspect? Unlike a bathhouse, which is a pool-like tub in which people cleanse themselves, I am alone in my friend's large, but not absurdly large, tub. Although I know they exist, I imagine bathhouses as 'larger bathtubs', with people bobbing about like raisins in hot, weak tea. The experience of being in a very large, pool-like tub for cleansing my body is unfamiliar to me. First, bathhouses are not that common where I live. Second, no longer am I completely comfortable with the notion of being naked in front of others. Regardless, my friend's home is not a public bathhouse where I must uneasily explore the limits of my North American sensibilities. While a bathhouse's nearest cousin the 'hot tub' provides aspects of relaxation and contemplation, it does not spring to mind as a cleansing tub. Imagine the shock and chagrin if you introduced a piece of soap into your gym's or neighbour's hot tub!

Larger tubs might allow more people but as an adult I am either alone in the bathroom whilst bathing, or with my lover. Sharing a bath with my lover provides an element of relaxation, but mutual cleansing may become a means to an end. I remember baths with him where, wrapped in hot water and each other, we drifted off to sleep, waking only as the water cooled. I remember also bathing with my family in our tub, feeling secure and happy and I am reminded similar stories from my friends with children. The child announces her arrival by sliding a Hotwheel down the side of the tub, increasing the number of people in the tub. Soon, however, bathing alone becomes a mark of independence and there are no more Hotwheels, just locked doors and demands to be left in peace.

Rolling over again, I muse that the number of people in the bath seems inconsequential. A tub with many children in it remains a tub; a tub with a lover in it remains a tub. A tub with a cat, a dog or a duck is still a tub. Made of iron or steel, plastic or fibreglass, a tub holds water and

bathes those within regardless of the number. Like the water, and heedless of the reason, additional people do not change the *aspect* of the tub, they may merely change the intent of the bath.

Time May Tell

Longer-term guests may come to use the bathtub as you do. My cousin lived with us for several months and used the tub for any number of baths. The turning point for becoming comfortable using someone else's bathtub might be the duration one lives in the house. These guests are not merely dropping by on the way home after work to bathe, then scampering home to their lives. They have incorporated themselves into the rhythm of your house. And in the rhythm of my home, I do not consider the time spent in my bath. It is not considered a gift or a favour. I just spend the time. I announce my intention to bathe, run the bath, and am there as long as I wished.

I might wander around the house gathering the things I want with me; smell the bottles of scent to add to the water, chose one; stick my hand under the gushing tap to gauge the water's temperature; pour my drink; put on some music; find a book and the tray my lover made to put across the rim to hold these things; check the water level; realize I have to refill my glass. I might fold my clothes in the bedroom. I might just disrobe abstractedly, dropping them on the floor to be picked up at some future time. Guiltily, I cast a sidelong glance at my clothes kicked to the side of the room and think I'll put them in the laundry.

Most of all, I might expect not to be interrupted. I may expect to feel cosseted. I may expect that no one would need the facilities; or if they did need the facilities they would be able to access them but not impede my bath. I could read the entire book. I might add more hot water if I wished. I could get out to pee, and return to the tub to further contemplate the mysteries of life. After luxuriating in my bath, I reluctantly get out, patchily dry myself off, gulp down the remainder of my drink, cross the hall, flop naked on my bed and go to sleep.

At my friend's house, all these activities would tie up her bathroom for an inordinate time, to say nothing of stumbling around in her home, naked, bleary and intoxicated, looking for a place to sleep. In my friend's house, I am not a long-term guest. I am a passer-by, a dropper-in. And frankly, drying off, dressing in clean clothes, visiting for a while, then returning to my own home to go to bed only heightened the differences between baths at home and at her house.

Climbing out of the Bath

When I asked my friend for a *real* bath, for what was I actually asking? A measure of time where I could be alone? A place where I could complete a ritual of identity? A thing in which to cleanse my body or my soul? Perhaps I wanted an identical experience to using my own tub: as if the same type of space equated to the same types of feelings. Was I asking her for the privilege of using her bathtub as I would use mine? As a sanctuary, a haven, even a place of renewal and rejuvenation? Yes, without knowing it, I was asking her for all those things. I was asking her to replicate the experience of comfort I have in my bathtub without understanding completely what comforts me about the act of having a bath. I was asking her to envelope me in her intimate life, but instantaneously, without the time served as a denizen of her home. I presumed on our friendship, and where I was comfortable enough for the first steps, those into the bathroom, I did

not understand what I needed to do to take the next step into her tub and lay down in it. There was a boundary there, unexpected, intimate and intangible.

These boundaries of intimacy might be like the meniscus of the water: thin and pliable, they hold the edges of our lives together. I use my tub as a ritualistic space and attribute those uses to my friend and her bathtub. I cleanse both my mind and my body of the cares of the day: I believe she does as well. My tub heals my soul, eases my burden and soothes my muscles: I believe hers does the same for her. There is, for me, an intimacy to the tub in my home, unlike that of a tub in a motel. As I lay in my friend's tub, afloat in the steamy water, I think that not only has her naked body lain where mine is lying, but also her burdens have potentially occupied the same space. Her cares have drained from her as mine drain from me. The enamel coddling my body, urging relaxation, has coddled her and urged relaxation upon her. When I asked her for a *real* bath at her home, I was asking her for a mechanism whereby I could enjoy the privilege of a space and time to myself, subject to my whims, and mine only. But I only thought of going in her bathroom, not of getting in the tub, being in the tub. Nor did I think of getting out of the tub, my next steps.

Where did I go once I left her tub's haven? Contrary to habit, contrary to comfort, I clambered out of her tub, visited with her for a while, and came home. I realize now why I felt awkward bathing in her tub. The arc of my bathing experience was dropped pell-mell into the arc of a visit to my friend's house. Her house was not my home. Her tub, always present but backgrounded in previous visits, was awkwardly brought forward, made visible by my desire to re-create a very specific experience I have created, nurtured even, over time. Also the experience *takes* time. It begins with a desire to be cosseted and ends with the desire abated by the *total* ritual of the experience. My latent expectations around hospitality that accompany me when visiting her at her home accompanied me into her tub. I did not think of the unknown rhythms of her home reverberating through the water, through me, muffled and faint, but present. Nor did I think of how they would resonate. My tub at home invites me but it also regulates my household to also accept this invitation on my behalf. The syncopation of her household's rhythm was different than that of my household. My bathing ritual was disrupted by my perception of my friend, who I anticipated as being outside awaiting me. Where my bathtub's thingness is fully realized, I did not allow her bathtub to do its thing. I understand now how my ritual of comfort and intimacy around bathing does not begin or end with the tub. The tub is in the middle. The ritual, like the water enveloping me, envelops the tub.

My bath is getting cold and the bubbles have dispersed. I realize it is time to get out and go to bed. I push the plug down with my foot and the water gurgles out, swirling around, along with all the cares of my day. The water recedes in a steady flow, revealing the tub's smooth, shiny sides. I reach for my towel, wrap myself up in it, pick up the cat, switch out the light and leave my newly-renovated bathroom. Then I complete my ritual by climbing into bed.

References

Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.