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the village

VOICE

*An Upstate
Story*

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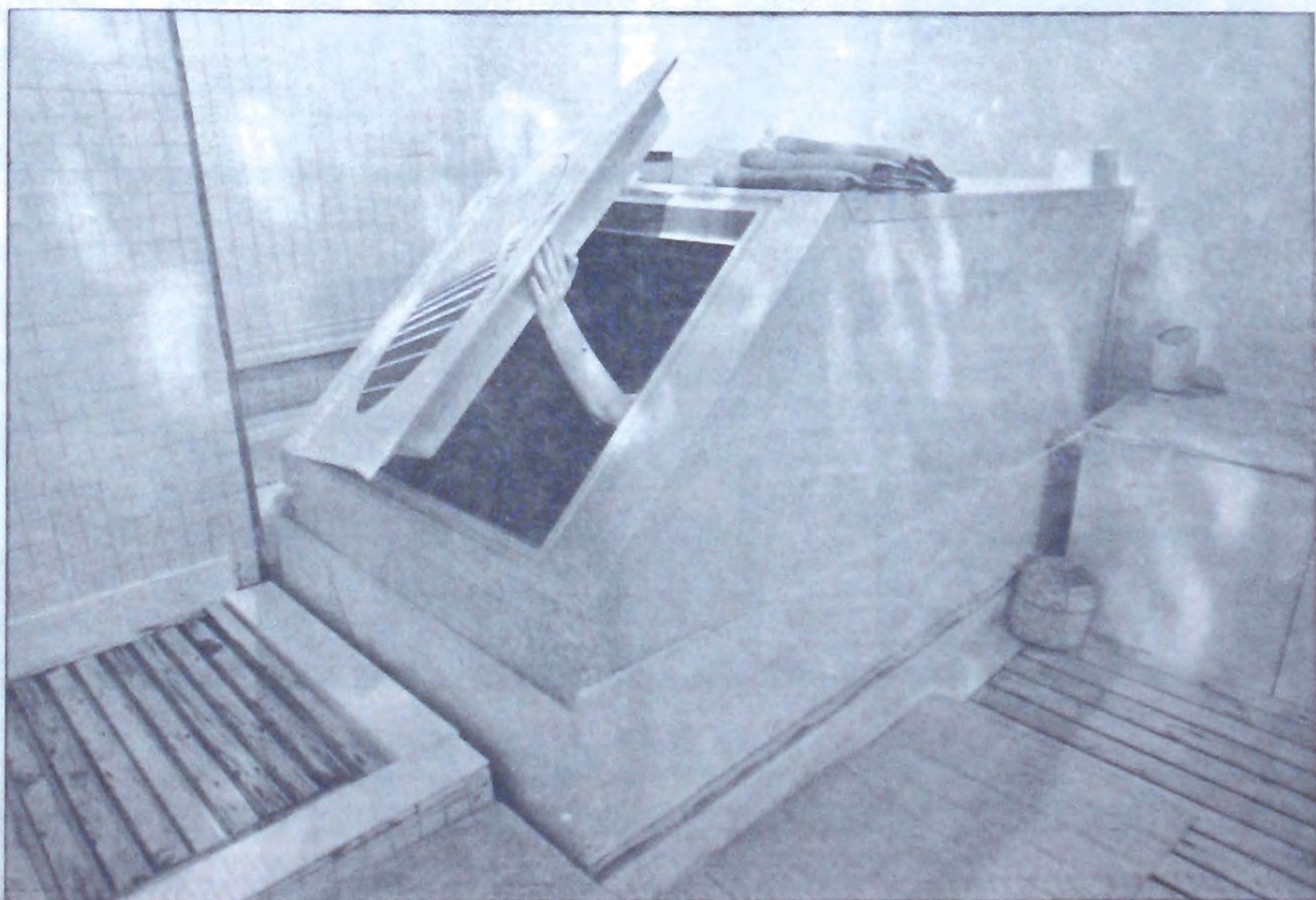
A gigantic real estate development of luxury high-rises, possibly the biggest such in Manhattan's history, is on its way to becoming the Upper West Side Gold Coast. The project is called Lincoln West, or "Miami on the Hudson," depending who you talk to. The price of the 4850 proposed luxury condominiums is expected to start at \$150,000 for a studio. The mind boggles at what a three-bedroom abode might go for. The waterfront mini-city will encompass the 76.4 acres that extend from 59th Street to 72nd Street, an area currently known as the Penn yards. The financing will come entirely from an entity called B.A.

THE BATTLE FOR LINCOLN WEST

Capital, a private Argentinian corporation represented by one Dr. Carlos Varsavsky and owned by the Macri Group, Argentina's leading developer, headquartered in Buenos Aires. The development calls for a \$1 billion investment over 10 years, yet B.A. Capital claims that it will ask for no public money and no tax abatements.

Everything will be set to go on the waterfront once the matter of a zoning variance to permit housing is cleared up. Upper West Side residents, Community Board 7, the Sierra Club, Assemblyman Jerrold Nadler and other elected officials, unions, freight (Continued on page 11)

ISOLATION TANKS: COMING TO YOUR SENSES (P.15)



JAMES HAMILTON

Tanks for the Memories

By Mike Hutchison

I'd been vaguely aware of isolation tanks for years, but had always imagined them in underground laboratories, wires running from the tank to a bank of huge machines with blinking lights, wild-eyed scientists running around with clipboards muttering about EEGs, skin resistance, alternate realities, and self-meta-programming. It all seemed quite interesting, but exotic, expensive, far removed from the vicissitudes of daily urban life.

Then, in what seemed like a few months, these tanks moved out of the research lab into the marketplace. Today more than 50 commercial float centers, where anyone can rent time in an isolation tank—like trampoline centers or go-kart tracks—have opened up in cities across the country, under names like Tranquility Tanks, Womb Room, Float to Relax, and Aquaphoria; and new centers are springing up all the time. It is unprecedented: virtually without advertising or the kind of media hype that popularized such earlier fads as hula hoops, Davy Crockett, beatniks, acid, and biofeedback, floating has become the hottest mass entertainment since cruising for burgers.

But something about this nagged at me. Curious, these millions paying \$25 a pop to be absolutely alone for an hour or two—precious loneliness!—in a culture where most are so terrified of being alone they'll drop \$25 just to sit around a bar with people they can't stand. How retrograde, these masses paying enthusiastically to enter a state of "sensory deprivation" in a culture where status is earned by frantically exposing one's senses to as many stimulations as possible. What explanation for healthy, attractive people paying handsomely for a concentrated dose of introspection, in a society where introspection is generally looked upon as some antisocial, perhaps subversive, aberration?

The phenomenon fascinated. Where's the thrill, I wondered, in lying all alone in a box? Also, although I noticed the busy tank centers in almost every city I was in, and heard of the millions of happy floaters, I personally had never met anyone who'd done this thing, and neither had any of my friends. Could this be that contradiction in terms, a secret mass movement? The question became pressing: *who are these people, I wondered, and why are they doing this thing?*

In search of an answer I found myself standing wet, naked, and alone one afternoon, preparing to climb into what looked like a giant wooden coffin with one beveled end. The flotation tank, one of two operated in a loft eight floors above lower Fifth Avenue in Manhattan by Tranquility Tanks, Inc., was in a pleasant private room—soft lights played through prisms casting rainbows along the walls, a bouquet of lilacs adorned the tank, and the room had its own shower, toiletries, air filter, and negative ion generator—everything one might need for hours of luxurious floating. And yet, despite the pleasant surroundings, the fact remained, the damn thing was like a coffin, and dark inside, and I felt a little edgy about sealing myself inside it. I had determined to go through with the float before talking to anyone who had experienced it, so my reactions would be my own, unaffected by expectations or someone else's ideas, but I had heard somewhere that tanks were absolutely safe for everyone but "borderline" cases. Was I, unbeknownst to myself, on the verge of some psychic border, so that a few jolts of sensory deprivation would send me climbing over the wire and I would



JAMES HAMILTON

emerge from the tank drooling and wild-eyed, babbling of aliens who had communicated a special message to me that would save the world? Later, in talking with floaters, I discovered that almost everyone feels a few wim-wams the first time in the tank—will I be able to breathe? will I drown? will I feel claustrophobic? In fact it's probably part of our genetic heritage, this canny reluctance to insert oneself into tiny, pitch-black, soundproof enclosures filled with water; and if it isn't it should be.

But once inside the tank, the edginess translated into excitement. I was ready for a taste of the millennium. I stretched out on my back—the water was only 10 inches deep, but saturated with 800 pounds of Epsom salts it had such buoyancy I bobbed on top of it like a rubber duckie in a giant bathtub. I reached up, pulled the hatch shut (floaters can easily open the hatch from inside the tank any time they wish) and was instantly in a different place: utter blackness. I've never seen anything this black in my entire life, said a voice in my head.

The water, warmed to a constant 93.5 degrees Fahrenheit, felt neither warm nor cool, and very quickly seemed to disappear altogether, leaving me with the feeling of floating weightlessly on my back in black space. The absence of external stimuli turned my awareness inward, and I quickly realized there is no such thing as sensory deprivation: I was creating my own sensory stimulation. My stomach gurgled like a cement mixer, heart boomed, lungs wheezed, and my eyeballs put on a fireworks display—exploding colors, pinwheels, checkerboards, and bright shifting landscapes of *phosphenes* (the light patterns created by the brain in the absence of light). Slowly my body seemed to spin, as if I were riding on a huge whirlpool. My body seemed to rise from horizontal to vertical, and continued until I was floating belly down and weightless, with no vertigo or discomfort. Okay, said the voice in my head, so it's a body trip.

Not so, or not entirely so—as each part of my body became deeply relaxed, that part seemed to disappear from awareness. The heart and lung sounds went away, body evaporated, until there was nothing left but me. There followed a series of something I can only call "events," since they were a seamless intermingling of ideas, images, sounds, sensations, emotions. My memory tossed up odd chunks—childhood scenes, vivid but fragmentary—which merged with familiar faces speaking to me, bright fantasies, shorthand thought notation that passed for ideas. They occurred helter-skelter, and it was a lot of

fun. I decided to try to control the stream of events, and found I could do so—like directing my own movie. I got revenge on an old girl friend by making her play a slapstick scene—but where did all those cream pies come from? However, the effort of will it took to control things seemed to distract me from the mindless pleasures of merely circulating. I decided on one more experiment and asked: why do people want to undergo sensory deprivation?

Immediately came a rapid-fire series of events, in which I saw/thought/heard/re-read from long forgotten books word for word passages dealing with: Indian yogis being buried alive, silent hermit monks, Tibetan lamas existing for years sealed in pitch-black Himalayan caves, Jesus fasting 40 days alone in the desert with the devil, Proust in his cork-lined room; Freud with a patient reclining on a couch in sightless reverie as the doctor sat behind him saying nothing; Blind Pugh in *Treasure Island* racing from the Admiral Benbow Inn without running into anything after delivering the black spot; words from *Walden*: "it is easier to sail many thousands of miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone."

About 40 or 50 of these events occurred in a short time, and somehow they answered my question. I was later to think of this process when I heard experienced floaters talking about the tank as a "problem-solving tool."

After what seemed like 15 minutes, peaceful electronic music began gurgling into my ears through underwater speakers—the signal my hour was over. As I sank back into a heavy body from somewhere far away, my first thought was: they're going to have to come in and get me. And my next thought was: next time I'll stay longer. This made me laugh. I felt an immensely pleasant lassitude, similar to but better than that period after the alarm clock goes off and you continue to doze half-awake in bed. And yet I was somehow disappointed. Was this all it was? Nice, relaxing, some good sensations, but \$25 worth? My disappointment was due to the fact that I assumed the ride was over. I was mistaken. As I opened the hatch and climbed out I began to discover that the one-hour float is just the beginning, that the most stunning part of the process can be what happens afterward.

As I stand upright, my muscles are heavy but feel good—maybe something like an astronaut returning to gravity after a short time in space. Why do I keep chuckling deep in my throat, I wonder? I

look-at myself in the mirror—10 years younger and a lot happier than when I went in—and burst out laughing. In the shower, my skin is sleek, and it gives me pleasure to touch it. I find I am singing loudly, and shake my head from side to side, laughing.

On Fifth Avenue in the late afternoon light, I am made aware of how acute all my senses have become. My vision is sharp, all images clear, the colors intense. I smell everything—as women pass by after work I smell each of them from yards away, scents wafting off them and hanging in the air long after they've passed. So attractive! I feast my eyes on them, what an endless parade of beauty! and am filled with lust and delight. My ears are so keen I'm overwhelmed with keeping track of eight or 10 simultaneous conversations happening around me, some as far as half a block away. The conversations strike me as witty, or absurdly comical, and I can't keep this silly grin off my face. I run into a friend, and when I kiss her I get an intense whiff of tobacco, my lips sting from the nicotine on her lips. Crossing 14th Street I'm stunned by a sudden blast of cheap cigar smoke, hotdogs, late spring air, masses of people, and whirled back to my first experiences as a kid at the baseball park—the familiar smells hit me with an intensity and freshness I haven't known since childhood, and I am back at the park shuffling through peanut shells. And all the time, I'm full of a calm, clear energy. So, says the voice in my head, now we know what this floating in the tank thing is all about.

The feeling of being relaxed, recharged, and extremely sensitive went on for two days before tapering off. I began to talk with others who had floated, and found they'd all experienced the same intensification of sensations after coming out of the tank. Most of them particularly mentioned increased sexual arousal and pleasure. They said they thought better, worked better. Obviously, something that makes you feel so good has to be illegal, immoral, or fattening.

I wondered, are these effects *real*, or do I only *feel* they're real? I knew some drugs can make users feel more powerful, more aware, quicker, while in fact the users' performances are greatly deteriorated. What I needed was empirical verification, scientific knowledge, not the ecstatic hymns of fellow floaters.

Dr. Peter Suedfeld, head of the psychology department at the University of British Columbia, is one of the world's most respected authorities in the field of

Continued on next page

Continued from preceding page
sensory deprivation, with research and influential publications on the subject going back more than a decade. When I explained to him my experiences after leaving the tank, he laughed, then explained, "There's a change in the entire sensory receptive system, which when you come out makes all stimuli seem much more vivid and saturated, so that the sunshine is just really beautiful and the trees are gorgeous and food tastes magnificent and so on."

When I asked if these effects were real, quantifiable, Suedfeld simply said, "Yep," and referred to a scholarly article he had written elucidating the results of tests given to subjects who had undergone sensory deprivation: the tests indicated that sensory deprivation had created what Suedfeld calls "beneficial disturbances" of perceptions, among them increased visual acuity, increased tactile perception, increased auditory sensitivity, and increased sensitivity to sweet and bitter tastes and to pain (and therefore I assume to pleasure). Some of these "beneficial disturbances" lasted as long as two weeks.

As if these startling facts weren't enough, Suedfeld also noted that sensory deprivation has a similarly "beneficial" effect on such intellectual functions as learning, recall, I.Q. scores, various perceptual-motor tasks, visual concentration, visual storage, and discriminatory learning; there are other beneficial effects on the electrical activity of the brain, biochemical secretions, galvanic skin response, motivation, development, group interaction, introspection, and creativity. Suedfeld concluded, "This is probably as wide a range of effects as has been investigated in any substantive area by any technique known to psychologists." (Suedfeld points out these results are not from experiments with isolation tanks but sensory deprivation chambers, in which a subject is confined to a bed in a lightless, soundless room, with cardboard sleeves around his arms to restrict movement and external stimulation—a situation most subjects found rather unpleasant. But since isolation tanks have proven to be even more efficient than the chamber at restricting environmental stimulation, such as gravity, it is reasonable to assume that isolation tanks are, as Suedfeld says, "equally good if not better" in the range and intensity of their "beneficial effects.")

This seemed significant: some religions, drugs, and self-improvement techniques claim to change behavior; but here was a cautious scientist telling me that, in effect, spending time in an isolation tank can not only make people feel good, it can actually make them *better*—more sensitive, more creative, smarter. These changes were, Suedfeld pointed out, "short-term changes," but they were actual, measurable, and "occur pretty regularly." So what we were talking about was not *Altered States*, but *Superior States*. And to get there you don't have to do anything more strenuous than float around in the dark for a while. Imagine, I thought, if something like this was being sold over the counter.

And then, thinking of the thousands of new tanks being sold at \$3000 to \$5000 each, the millions of eager floaters paying their \$25 for each hour, I realized, well, that's what this is all about.

Suedfeld's interests in isolation tanks are not just in research but in practical ways tanks can be used to change behavior. He believes tanks can be extraordinarily effective in traditional psychotherapy, by relaxing inhibitions, increasing self-awareness and communication. As he spoke I envisioned a modern Freud, with cigar, recorder, and EEG, listening to his patient's voice emerging from a speaker, as he sits next to a huge shiny box, the sound of soft splashing from within... or even better, both the shrink and the patient bobbing, side by side in the black chamber diving deep into the black waters of the psyche.

Suedfeld also believes isolation tanks are of great importance in fields such as behavioral medicine as in treatment of stress diseases, hypertension, and lifestyle health problems such as smoking, alcoholism, and drug-addiction.

In fact, Suedfeld sees such promise in the therapeutic use of isolation tanks that, when asked about any potential dangers in tanking, he voiced a fear that people might simply become *too* enthusiastic, seeing the tank as some sort of cure-all, and that "when people find out it's not a panacea that cures everything for everybody, they might just reject it totally, which would be a disaster." Thus he cautions against exaggerated expectations: "It is relaxing, it is enjoyable, you can have fantasies, when you come out you really feel good and the world looks like fun... but if you go in there expecting it'll cure all the problems of your life, forget it."

Impressed by Suedfeld's enthusiasm, I began talking with tank manufacturers, operators of tank centers, and people involved with tank research, and found that serious research is only in its early stages. Apparently tank research fell into disfavor at some point in the '60s—perhaps in part because of Dr. John Lilly's celebrated exploits in the tank while tripping on LSD—but in the last year has come to life with an explosion of interest, in large part as a result of the mass popularity of floating. But all in the field believe they're now on the verge of momentous discoveries. Says one manufacturer, "We've only begun to brush the snow off the tip of the iceberg."

The range of functions the isolation tank is already serving is impressive. One area where they've been wholeheartedly accepted is athletics: professional, college, and Olympic athletes now use tanks in a variety of ways. Many, such as Dallas Cowboy placekicker Rafael Septien, claim it aids them in concentration and in the process of visualization—that important part of the "inner game" in which the athlete visualizes himself or herself performing perfectly, with the effect of improving the subsequent performance. The Philadelphia Eagles and Denver Broncos use the tanks for relaxation; the result has been fewer injuries and enhanced performance.

Athletes also claim the tank helps injuries heal faster, helps their bodies recuperate from the stresses of competition more rapidly, and significantly reduces pain. This anti-pain effect is something all floaters have noticed, and every tank center operator I spoke to said a significant number of their regulars were people with chronic pain problems—lower-back pain, arthritis, bursitis, migraine—who found immediate and long-lasting relief through floating.

What causes this pain relief? My grandmother's cure-all for pains and strains was to soak them in Epsom salts, so the warm solution of Epsom salts in the tanks must have some beneficial effect. However, Gary Higgins, founder and president of Float to Relax Inc., the largest tank manufacturer and operator of 27 outlets in the U.S., claims that the deep relaxation "stimulates the production of the body's own opiates, or painkillers. We believe a chemical change occurs in the body when relaxation is reached and we're now involved in research to study the long-term benefits of the increased production of beta endorphins, which are the body's own painkillers."

One thing all floaters and researchers agree on is that floating brings deep relaxation, a relaxation one recent study indicates lasts as long as three weeks. The immediate cause of this profound relaxation is not clear, but one study shows that flotation dramatically increases theta wave activity in the brain: theta waves indicate a level of relaxation deeper than the alpha state, and EEG studies of Zen monks in deep meditation show them generating theta waves. Virtually everyone also agrees that the relaxation achieved in the tank is generally deeper than that reached by relaxation techniques such as autogenic training, self-hypnosis, progressive relaxation, and transcendental meditation. While some of these disciplines require many sessions of arduous practice to master, most floaters find they enter a state of profound relaxation within a few minutes after first entering the tank.

The effect widespread tank use could have simply on one aspect of American life—stress-related illness and anxiety—is hinted at by Higgins, who claims that "80 to 85 per cent of all illness is psychosomatic in nature; another way of saying that is that they're stress-related." At least in one stress-related illness, hypertension, experiments at the Medical College of Ohio have demonstrated conclusively that regular floating markedly reduced the blood pressure of a number of sufferers from hypertension. Serious tank research is also getting under way on medical applications of flotation at Lawrence University, Yale, and UCLA, among others.

As I spoke to experimenters with isolation tanks, I found again and again that where I'd expected to hear ethereal effusions about states of consciousness and cosmic vibrations, instead I found everyone speaking in very down-to-earth language about specific but somewhat ordinary uses for tanks, ways of using tanks as

a "tool" (a favorite word with all tank people). I had expected to hear exotic tales, but was being shown scholarly articles and hearing plans to install tanks in offices as "decision-making" tools. I had set out expecting I would connect the tank and floaters with some remnant of '60s consciousness—perhaps as some kind of technological offshoot of the psychedelic era, with the tank as some kind of high-tech fast-food-for-the-spirit drive-in—the Big Mac of mind exploration.

But for the most part, what I found were practical people—generally creative, intelligent, articulate. And if there is some hint of the '60s in their belief in the transforming powers of the isolation tank, it is a transformation they speak of on a very practical, socially oriented, self-improvement level: helping people learn faster, heal faster, get rid of bad habits, operate more efficiently with less stress, think more creatively, solve their problems. Not to mention have better sex and play better racquetball.

Virtually all of them believe that the tank boom has only begun—many spoke of their visions of the coming years, which include isolation tanks coming into everyday use as educational, therapeutic, and recreational tools at hospitals, clinics, schools, offices, hotels, prisons, and—who knows—maybe at airport waiting rooms. One tank manufacturer told me he is now producing a snazzy new "state of the art" tank that floats two people at once, with underwater lighting, hydrosonic stereo, a jacuzzi, and lots of extras, all computer-controlled—"It's like buying a Cadillac," he says. Some have even confided to me that they think the tank will have a transforming effect on all aspects of society, like television, except bigger.

Bigger than television! The idea is staggering and somehow unsettling. Visions of utopia always have ominous overtones. For decades most Americans went to the neighborhood theater frequently—it was a communal experience, as they sat in a darkened room with hundreds of neighbors and strangers, sharing the same fantasy. Then television came along—The Box—and the audience was reduced to individual families sitting in darkened living rooms, and if they didn't like what was playing, they could change channels. And soon there were multiple-television families, with a set in the bedroom, the kids' room, the living room, and the audience was reduced to one. Now we have the tank, and people are finding they can leave behind not just neighbors and families and livingrooms, but their own bodies. They don't watch the box, they climb inside it, and the movies they make in the dark are all their own. And if they don't like what's playing, well, they can change... And soon, perhaps, each family member will have his or her own tank, and in the evenings the towns and cities will be strangely dark and quiet, and in the darkened houses and apartments, the only sound will be the muffled, gentle splashing, the slow peaceful breathing of the profoundly relaxed, the tranquil masses.

The Trouble with Tanks

Those who want to make the plunge should be aware that the float described above is not necessarily typical—your experiences depend almost entirely on your state of mind and expectations at the time of the float, and reactions have ranged from boredom to euphoria. Generally, the first portion of a first float is given over to familiarizing oneself with the physical aspects of being in the tank. The door can easily be opened from within, but since one can lose all sense of direction while floating, some might have a fluttery moment of disorientation while trying to find where the door is. The water gives off a strong sharp odor of hot towels and gymnasiums which some find unpleasant, and the 100 per cent humidity inside the tank at first seems thick and hard to breathe. However, fresh air is constantly pumped into the tank, one be-

comes used to the odor, and with increased relaxation breathing becomes easy. Now and then your body bumps into a wall of the tank, and even the most gentle pushing-off can cause you to rebound across to the opposite wall, from which you also rebound, etc.—a process known as "ping-ponging," which you learn to overcome through relaxation.

Floating has the effect of pinpointing areas of stress and making you aware of tensions and torsions you never knew you were carrying around. During the initial relaxation process many become acutely aware of old injuries—not with pain, but the realization that there is continuing tension or misalignment in the area. For many, the area of greatest tension is the back of the neck and upper shoulders, and many floaters find all tension quickly gone from the rest of their body, leaving a knot of intense, almost vibrant tight-

ness in the back of their neck—some describe it as a glowing ball, others as seeming to be resting with the back of their neck pressed against the point of a pyramid. With patience, and by experimenting with different arm positions (floating at your sides, over your head, behind your neck), this deep-seated tension will disappear, giving the floater a pleasant feeling of release.

As for contraindications or dangers, Dr. Suedfeld says, "I don't think tanks are dangerous, if you're in good health and reasonably non-crazy." Some point out that people who are claustrophobic, highly obsessive-compulsive, or afraid that in isolation they will be forced to encounter parts of their mind they wish to avoid, could have troubles in the tank; but such people are unlikely to have any great desire to climb into the tank in the first place.

At the centers listed below, the cost for an hour of floating is \$20-\$25 for the

first hour, and \$15-20 for further hours. Each center is associated with a holistic health center, and offers acupuncture, reflexology, body therapies, counseling, and other options in addition to floating. The centers in the New York area are:

TRANQUILITY TANKS INC.
141 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010. (212) 475-5225.

REJOICE
984 North Broadway, Yonkers, New York 10701. (914) 968-4558.

INNER VISION TANKS
812 State Road, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. (609) 924-6234.

TRANQUIL IMMERSION
H.E.A.R. Institute, 160 Newman Springs Road, Redbank, New Jersey (201) 580-0410.

—M.H.