# Ask Dr. Debbie...

## The Underside of Water: Reflections on the Meaning of Diving

*By Debra A. Hill, MD*

Recently while viewing some old videotape that my husband and I shot in Truk Lagoon, I noticed something about the shots that I hadn't before. Typically I'm focused on what we are shooting of the reef or sea life, but this time I noticed that there were several shots looking from the depths, up to the underside of the water. Some of these were of the diver plunging into the water, some were from the diver's perspective of looking up as they were exiting the water, and some were of just plain old looking upwards to the underside of the water.

I often like to gaze upward to watch the underside of the water as it moves in an inverse manner compared to that of the surface. As I was looking at the video we'd shot in Truk, I began to contemplate the unique characteristics of the underside of water. It is a ceiling, albeit a permeable ceiling, for us when we are diving, and so it also is a door. But, it also reflects back images like a mirror. And, while this underside of water is like a mirror, it is also a window as well that lets us view impressionistic appearing images of what is on the other side—giving a magical appearance to an often unnoticed world above.

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I had initially planned to write a more technical and informative article this month about medicines that have their origins in the sea, but decided to save that for the future. Instead I felt that at this time of year when the season is changing, it is a time for reflecting. So I am sharing with you some of the things that I've come to treasure from my experience of diving.

As I began to think of this underside of water being a ceiling, a mirror, a window and a door, I realized that passing from the surface to the underside of the water, through that door allows me entrance into a very special home. I say home, because it is a place for sharing and for visiting with my fellow divers. This home environment affords a connection with others like nothing else on the other side of that watery ceiling. When communicating with my fellow dive buddies underwater, there are no words spoken. Some might argue that without the ability to speak, that we cannot truly understand each other. But, actually, according to my good friend who has a Ph.D. in Communications, 97% of our communication is nonverbal, and 3% has to do with the actual words themselves.

We all have had times while diving when we had tried to communicate something to our dive buddy, but it seemed that they just couldn't understand. When I think if those times, it's usually been when I'd tried to communicate the words of my thought, rather than the thought or feeling in its essence. When I've communicated the essence of my thought or feeling, I can tell that I've truly communicated—and it is on a deeper level often than any words could ever indicate. This level of communication can be on a very visceral level and feels like true sharing—human to human.

Yesterday, I had the pleasure of diving with Cathy Kligman at the Aquarium of the Pacific. Cathy had won the opportunity to dive as a guest diver at the Aquarium of the Pacific at

last months' Club meeting. I had only met Cathy that night of the meeting and so didn't know much about her at all when she arrived yesterday morning to dive with our Friday Morning Dive Team, of which I am the Team Leader.

While we were suiting up I asked about her dive experiences and she told of starting to dive in 1979 and of being the President of the OBDC. The OBDC is the Old Broads Dive Club. I had not heard about the OBDC before and Cathy explained that they have about 130 members and they meet four times per year and go on fantastic dive trips together. She's dived all over the world—such as Fiji, The Bahamas, the Caribbean, and is going to Palau in February. She also shared that she hadn't been diving in about a year, and that she hadn't been in cold water since 1979.

That was about all we had time to chat about before it was time to "dive-in" to putting gear together and getting into the Blue Cavern Exhibit for our first dive, of the four, we typically do on Friday mornings. Cathy was very open and eager to wearing a thicker wetsuit than she was used to for the warm water diving. She quite matter of factly got suited up in much heavier gear than she is used to, in order to make the first dive into the 60 degree water of Blue Cavern. It was a little challenging for her to walk the distance to the entrance to the exhibit with all that gear. Cathy never complained, and once in the water, it was a dream for her.

I was reminded of the story, "The Night Before Christmas", when Santa came down the chimney and "spoke not a word", but went about his magical duties of gift giving." I felt like a little elf myself as I lead Cathy into the Blue Cavern Exhibit. We cruised around, and she hovered and gazed at a friendly female Sheep head that seemed to almost want to kiss her mask to welcome her to her lovely home here in Blue Cavern. Then there was the Giant Black Sea Bass that came 'round to check Cathy out, but after a quick glance, decided he was off to other things.

The dive was short, about 15 minutes, and then we were scurrying to rinse off and get into the Tropical Reef to feed. Cathy had warned me that she'd had trouble in the past with weight belts loosening up when wet and beginning to slide off of her straight hips. While in Tropical Reef, in the thick of beginning to feed, I could see her reaching for the ends of her weight belt. Without words, she and I solved the problem and went about the dive. She loved hovering just above the bottom of the exhibit and gazing into the face of the 10 foot long zebra shark. I could almost feel her smile through the water as she peered at a panther grouper nestled in an artificial purple vase coral. As I turned to check on the other divers in the exhibit, I saw that the turtle had come off the sandy bottom and was gliding slowly toward the surface. I signaled to Cathy to take a look. We both watched quietly as this majestic creature moved through the water so comfortably in his watery home. I found myself gazing at the underside of the water as this turtle floated up and noticed the reflections of odd shapes from the reef below and at the same time I could see the squiggly images of the railings around the exhibit and the crane that hangs over the water from the concrete walkway above the surface.

I got to thinking how amazing it is to connect with someone that I hardly know, and connect without words, in this home below the surface, where we shared in silence the wonder of these animals. This underside of water created a home with a window on a world that allowed us to look into the mirror of our own minds and communicate in a deeper wordless way that goes beyond what anyone ever experiences on land. I love the underside of water and always will—it's a wonderful home for sharing experiences.

Happy and Safe Diving!

Yours Truly,

*Debbie Hill Titus, MD*

IMPORTANT SAFETY WARNING REGARDING POTENTIAL REGULATOR FAILURE OF SCUBAPRO MK20: http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/prerel/prhtml07/07501.html.