

A Conversation with Marja Pijpers and Saskia van Rees

Asthma Center Hornerheide, Netherlands

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(edited for clarity)

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Marja Pijpers is a founding member of the Watsu Nederlands team. Born April 13, 1955, she is married and the mother of four children. She studied at the Academy for Physical Therapy at Hertogenbosch from 1974 to 1977, and for the last thirty years has been active as a physical therapist. After graduating, Marja worked first with adults in a rehabilitation center and, after three years, began treating children. She was on staff at several hospitals in the course of her career, but is currently in private practice.



Marja has been working in the water for eight years, initially under the supervision of Johan Lambeck. They were treating children, innovating their own hydrotherapy techniques. The use of flotation devices, rather than actually holding the patients, defined these explorations. Marja began studying aquatic bodywork in 2000. She completed Watsu I and II, then Basic and Advanced Healing Dance, assisting in the meantime courses held by Helen Schulz, Basia Spzak, and Careen van Son.

Together with Saskia van Rees, Marja has been coming every other Saturday afternoon for the last seven years to the Asthma Center Hornerheide pool to treat all kinds of people, but primarily physically and mentally handicapped children.

She and Saskia also hold staff trainings at institutions that care for the physically and mentally handicapped. Their goal is to introduce to therapists who are already working in the water what they can do in the direction of Watsu. Marja is qualified to instruct Basic Watsu and also teaches baby swimming. Email: G.vanoorsouw@home.nl

Saskia van Rees is one of Watsu Nederlands' founding members. She studied psychology at the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, and gained her first experience in this field in the 70's in a residential home doing play therapy with autistic and psychotic children.



In the 80's and 90's Saskia made approximately 60 films about video hometraining, birth and baby, home birth, and "kangarooing" premature babies. She also made films for various healthcare organizations, including films about the elderly and people with multiple handicaps.

In the same period she founded with friends a non-profit organization, The Body Language Foundation, sponsoring research and documentation of spontaneous birth positions, natural ways of giving birth, and the intense communication between parents and their newborn babies. In cooperation with a group of progressive midwives, gynecologists and pediatricians, they organized congresses in big theaters for pregnant couples, showing films about natural ways of giving birth, and the body language of birth and baby. This involvement continues on into the present.

Saskia has authored several books, including *Burial of the Moons*, *Two Am I*, and *Baren*. For other books she has supplied the photography.

Saskia began studying Watsu in 2000 together with Monique Janssens and Marja Pijpers, with whom she founded Watsu Nederlands and almost immediately began organizing water trainings. In 2004 she studied Healing Dance and began applying it in her water sessions. In 2007 she completed Advanced Healing Dance with Alexander. Email: info@watsu.nl

Alexander: *Marja, you say you have been working with all kinds of clients. Since you studied Basic Healing Dance about four years ago, did you notice any change in your work?*

Marja: The Watsu was an eye-opener for me, to be so close to people in the water. I had always been giving instructions from a distance, and now it was more and more an interaction. But with the children I am working with you can't do Watsu for so long, because they want to play, they want to move. And that side was missing, really a lack. With Healing Dance I discovered I could do it all together, and it's more playful, it's more moving. Some of the children are spastic, they have muscle

diseases or metabolic diseases. They can't move themselves so much. So when you give them those movements in water they are so joyful, they laugh, they are so happy and they relax. With only the Watsu moves there was not that effect. It is the moves, the big moves, that the children enjoy, like the waves and the spirals, And I became freer myself; I wasn't afraid anymore to hold them out away from me. When I had only studied Watsu I and II, I always kept them close to me. I felt I had to be careful with the head, but now I was freer. That's a very big change. Later on I did it also with adults, but for me it started with the children, the playing. Also with babies I am very free.

A: It has affected your baby swimming classes?

M: Yes.

A: Before you wouldn't move the babies so far away from you, and now you find that is okay?

M: Yes.

A: So that's a general effect of Healing Dance, you feel more comfortable holding your receivers father away, giving them more space and freedom?

M: It gave me the freedom first and then I could give it to the children. I wanted to teach the moves to the children's parents so they could do them with their children. I thought I could show it and then they could learn it, but it is not so easy. I thought when they see it they can do it, but no.

A: Are the mothers still nervous for their children?

M: Yes.

A: It seems to be a parental reflex to hold the head high out of the water...

M: And they are nervous about having water in the face, so I say to them Look, the children are laughing...

A: So parents in baby swimming classes have to get over that, don't they? You have to train the parents, too?

M: Yes, so that they can do it all with their own child. And also with handicapped children the parents need to know what their child especially needs.

A: So you are working with the parents of the handicapped children...

M: Yes, that is our approach. We want to have a course for them to give them the tools for their children. So they can do something more in the water than just holding and jumping and throwing....

Saskia: ...for years....

M: ...for years and years...

S: ...yes, always the same, jumping up and down...

M: They actually get more spastic...

A: You mean it's possible for a spastic child to become anxious when handled this way in the water?

M: Yes, I've seen the effects. On the other hand, they can become very, very relaxed in the water when you repeat the moves, the spirals and the holding positions. The holding is very important, not necessarily close, but just holding, so they feel comfortable and safe. It's so important. And then you can do a lot.

S: We treat a big spastic boy who's very noisy in the water. His mother took him to hydrotherapy for years without improvement...until Marja took him in her arms and he was like a baby.

M: And now when I float him he relaxes immediately and I think it's the holding and the stillness. When he's relaxed I can treat him; I can stretch him and give him the therapy he needs. That's my goal--to combine the relaxation with the treatment. Especially with older children from ten to eighteen, it's difficult on land, but in the water it's so easy.

S: I gave sessions for about two years to a fascinating, very spastic woman, slightly mentally handicapped, and also very badly visually impaired. She is emotionally not stable, and asthmatic as well. Especially at the start of a session she was extremely anxious, and used to get asthmatic attacks, sometimes very heavy and frightening to everybody in the pool. The transition from the normal, social reality

into the quite different, meditation-like state of a session was extremely difficult for her. Also the return at the end of the session, back to normal life, caused anxiety, and often a slight asthma attack.



After several months her anxiety was milder, but it never disappeared completely. It was not a fear of water, because she can swim, and she went swimming every week. I did not realize before I met her, what an impact these transitions in state of consciousness have, but I can understand, because the "normal" social life can be so stressful for people, even when they have only slight physical or mental handicaps. The history of many severely multiple handicapped persons

is full of drama, disappointment, discrimination, and misery.

Anyway, she loved her sessions, and when the asthma was over she was like an angel in heaven, enjoying everything, and especially in free movements she could be very wild. And I mean wild! And she would not stop anymore, but go on and on, moving like crazy. I had to be careful to let her slow down very gradually... We had a lot of fun!

It all worked, she was very much stabilizing, got a relationship, got married, and is living now with her husband independently. She moved to another place, and is writing me a letter now and then.

A: Wow, that is an impressive story. So, is it 35° or 36° C. water you work in?

M: Yes, either here at Hornerheide or at another daytime facility for children nearby. Disabled children are very pure. They react immediately. If you do something wrong or hold them incorrectly, they react. But if something is good, they react positively. I've learned a lot from them about how to handle and relate to them.

A: They give immediate feedback...

M: Yes....

A: So do you have some specific moves that you tend to use or can you think of some specific children you've worked with? What your approach has been in relation to Healing Dance?

M: I use a lot of Seaweed. That is safe for them; they are close and feel the contact. I use a lot of waves and spirals in First position, too. Also the Shin Across Belly position to be able to work on the feet and stretch the hips. And I will be able to use the Come Here stretch that we just learned pulling the foot. What else? The Hara Hug, it's very beautiful, especially for the children, oh they like it.

A: That's nice to hear.

M: I often combine it with lying on the belly, rolling them face down and then again supine. This requires them to lift their heads. And some children like to go underwater, so I can offer them a bit underwater and then come back to the surface.

S: I am in another world when I feel the water with somebody in my arms. Even when I am stressed after a hectic week...it does not affect the session: the water is always so helpful to us. I forget everything, there is no stress, no words, no socializing, nothing.

I like the waves and spirals in the beginning of a session. It is such a nice and quiet beginning, and it evokes a sense of infinity, of never ending movement. And you can do it also with persons who are not very flexible.

I give sessions to a woman who likes water and swimming very much, and within a few moments she is already dreaming away in the waves. She had an breast amputation, and sometimes she is worried and has all sorts of pain, especially in her back, low back pain. Actually I never did very much extra for her back, and yet... gradually her pains and fears disappeared, melting away in the feeling of joy of the movement. She loves the Healing Dance moves. Especially the freedom in the releases; she is sighing with relief then. It is just bliss.

Pain... It is obvious that during a session there is happening a lot, also on a hormonal level. I think of hormones that play a role during delivery as well, such as oxytocin, and especially endorphins as natural painkillers. Some research should be interesting...

A: I think so, too. Okay, so what are some of the disabilities that you've been working with?

M: We work with Rett Syndrome, a unique neurodevelopmental disorder which begins to show its affects in infancy or early childhood. We also have a lot of spastic children, some severely spastic. Some have athetoid movements, a spastic form with a continuous stream of slow, sinuous, writhing movements. They get very quiet when they are treated in the water. We work with autistic



children, too, and that is so beautiful when they want to lie in your arms, because normally they don't want contact. We also have autistic adults. They come for a treatment and then we hear from the facility where they live that they are changed after the Healing Dance. They are more at ease and it lasts for a few days, in which they sleep better and are less restless.

Saskia: They are autistic but they can dream away in the water, in the moves, so they are still in their own world. It is so beautiful because they feel you accept them in this world, in this dreaming world. Normally an autistic person has to adapt to social life all the time. It is exhausting for them, but they can rest in a session.

M: I let them feel that their body can do beautiful things in the water like rolling and turning. They like that.

A: So they enjoy that feeling that they can dance and move?

M: Yes, that they are free.

A: And the Healing Dance is giving them that?

M: Yes, especially the Healing Dance moves. They give them freedom and they don't have to communicate, they only have to lie in your arms and close their eyes.

A: So they don't fight you...

S: No, it's a symbiosis.

A: And that effect lasts for some time after the session, even with the autistic children?

M: Yes, it was a surprise to us. We didn't expect this.

S: It is so important to accept their world and to go into it and to build their world together. I understood this from my work a long time ago in my "former life" as a psychotherapist. And in the water it's actually the same.

A: You're participating with them in building their private world?

S: Yes, you can make it more spacious, more wonderful, more beautiful...

A: ...instead of demanding that they come out of it and be in our world...

S: Yes, it's so important.

M: And this functions especially well in the water. To hold them outside the water it is too close, but in the water there is something around you that makes it not too intimate. It's easier for them to allow being held in the water.

S: There's a lot of literature about holding the autistic on land. This often involves fighting to keep them, but in the water it's completely different. The water is holding you both.

M: I work with a boy who knows exactly where his difficulties are. When he's in the water and it's time to lower his head into the water, but he still wants to sit upright, he tells himself, "I have to lay down and close my eyes and I want this, but it's so difficult." When I begin the session with him it requires patience, but after five minutes he is able to lie down. If something disturbing happens, he sits up again. We work from half an hour to three quarters of an hour, and after twenty minutes he is always sleeping. It is such an experience for him. Even though he doesn't progress beyond this, he comes back every month because he wants to feel it again. But I don't think it can become quicker or easier for him. He is at his edge, but it is beautiful for him.

S: Transitions are very difficult for him.

M: Yes, going to new moves...

S: From First Position to Seaweed is an enormous change.

M: So I tell him in his ear what I am going to do, that it is all right, I am going to move him, that I am putting him on my shoulder, all is fine, no water will splash on his face... I have to talk with him and then it is easier.

S: And I want to tell you about an autistic girl, a young adolescent who was convinced that: "nobody can get me out of control!" She could not understand that she actually fell asleep during the first session already: "I was gone!?! " She couldn't believe it! (laughter) She lives in a protected environment, and they say that the benefits of the sessions are remarkable, that she is much more stable now, she makes more contact, and she is more relaxed.

In the beginning she was very tired after the sessions, really exhausted; she experiences it all very intensely. She had to lie down for a whole Saturday night after a session. She didn't like being so exhausted, and didn't come for several months. Then she came back and now she loves it, especially the dynamic moves, the rolls, the Vortex, the Too Bad Attitude. She is lying there like a Madonna in the waves, very still and beautifully concentrated, very sensitive. Sometimes moving her mouth as if she is whispering, but without sound, very mysterious. And suddenly laughing, excited by a roll! She loves the adventure in the Healing Dance moves. She says, "It feels so good, let's do it every day!"



M: Yes, she is somebody who likes the dynamic moves.

A: *So there's a lot of joy for her in receiving...*

M: And that is what you see when you work a lot with children--they laugh. It's so beautiful. Especially when you get wild and sweep them around quickly, they feel the streaming of the water, the moving in the

water. They can't move themselves, so when you let them feel the movement, it is so beautiful.

So the freedom and movement in the Healing Dance changed a lot for me. Watsu was an eye-opener, but Healing Dance is so completing it. It is so much deeper.

S: For ourselves, but also for the receivers, much, much deeper. And once you do it they want it again. They ask for it. It is dancing. It is so wonderful. Spastic people never can dance and their muscles can never relax except in this situation. Heaven on earth. Thanks to you...

A: I was just goofing around in the warm pool at Harbin...

S: Everybody's a dancer when you give Healing Dance. And that they are beautiful and accepted. People with mental handicaps are exposed to such discrimination and they have such frustration already from birth.

A: They are aware of the discrimination?

S: Of course they are. They are very stressed. They feel the discrimination every day.

A: Are you saying it's different for them in the water? They feel more equal and normal?

S: Yes, for me that is the most important aspect of the water work, especially for this group because they need so much.

M: ...and the elderly...

A: So there's a democratic principle, we're all just people, just Menschen.

M: ...and you are worthwhile to hold...

S: ...and following them...

A: Oh, really? Following them? Do you get to do some Relating and Mirroring?

M: Yes, you have to. Because they are handicapped you can't always apply the techniques. You can, but there is no joy, no excitement.

S: The concept of Healing Dance, and of Relating and Mirroring is so true: even if because of handicaps you can hardly move, you can still move, being received as an equal partner in this beautiful movement of dance. It is such a joy, like being in the heart of the universe.

A: And they have their own movements?

M: Their bodies have their own movements. They are special bodies.

A: Do you see some unwinding taking place or movements that free them? What do you notice?

M: When you do the wrong movements, you can feel it very well. What is good for them and what is not good for them, that is, what they don't want.

A: They don't pretend...

M: Never. They can't...The body has no mask...Real relaxation can be so difficult for them.

S: Those people with normal Watsu, you can't relax them; I always need waves and the feeling of the water. And then they relax, at least that's my experience with the difficult people. It was so surprising because the waves were difficult for me to learn in the beginning, so I thought they will never enjoy this. (laughter) But it's such an important move, especially for when they are anxious.

A: It's sort of like a lullaby, rocking, rhythmic...



S: Yes, it's the rhythm, but even more feeling the movement of the water; the water is moving them and you use the flow of the water, more important than using the hands. I feel grateful for my Watsu training. I learned a lot, especially from IAKA Helen and Arjana. They are both so extremely sophisticated in the water and excellent teachers as well. However, I think there are some essential differences between Watsu and Healing Dance. In Watsu you work on very specific meridians, and you might expect some benefits from this systematic approach. This gives a sense of giving a treatment to a client. This is not the case in Healing Dance. It doesn't feel as a treatment that you can give: it is playing, and it is all in the movement itself. There is no client; you are partners. You experience and enjoy together the beauty of a dance. It is healing from within.

A: So is there anything else we want to mention?

M: I'm very glad I discovered it. It's taught me also a lot, I changed, too. A few years ago I was the therapist, the giver, now it's more equal. You have to concentrate so much, because otherwise there is no flowing; when I am looking outside or talking, it is gone, nothing. And that is an experience that has been very deep for me, and it carries over into my other work.

A: That's good. The water work should transform us. We should be able to take what we experience in our sessions, which is a form of enlightenment, and live it.

M: We just have to feel them...

A: We learn from them so much...

M: That's the way.

S: Yes that's the way.

