

The Logic of Whales: A Meditative Essay

This was written for my Nature Writing Class with the assignment to write a meditative piece and incorporate a quote and outside sources into the meditation. It was published in Loras's undergraduate magazine called The Limestone Review.

“Our scanners say that they are about hundred feet below the boat right now.” I shivered - not a fearful shiver but rather one of realization. I gazed out at the vast empty plain of ocean laid out in all directions and realized how small this boat actually was in comparison to everything below. Everywhere I looked, I found the same eerie grey film covering the world. No birds in the sky for we were too far from land, no familiar drone of neighboring ships or planes.

Just water. To humans, there's an emptiness about the ocean, an unwelcoming atmosphere because we cannot see what lies below. The mutual silence of the other passengers assured me that we all felt the same uneasiness about the inability to see what lurked beneath. Maybe I did shiver out of some fear... How illogical. There are whales beneath me, not a leviathan!

People fear what they do not understand. This explains why people fear other races and religions, why they fear death. Socrates said, “Since we do not know what death is, it is illogical to fear it.” Yes! It is illogical to fear what we do not understand! But we do it anyways! Why? And people don't just dread the unknown; they experience a deep curiosity following swiftly behind fear. It's mystery, yet part of humanity.

As these two humpbacks glided below the boat, I felt both a fiery impatience surging within me as well as the queasy fright within my stomach. And then, on the other side of the

boat, I heard a rich SMACK! It was a crash, a slam, 30 tons of blubber slapping against Atlantic water. The sound was like a firework, a gunshot, an ear-splitting shock that zips through the ears and down through the muscles. I raced to the port side and saw the gargantuan ring of foam where the whale had broken through the surface. The waves pushed the boat backwards, and the weight of the observers cramming on the left side shifted the whole boat on a comical tilt. The foam ring just dwarfed us! It matched the length of the boat... and only about fifteen feet away! I had missed it... I heard it... but I missed it...

In the midst of my frustration, I spied the calf silently leap up and pirouette in a powerful yet elegant twist backwards into the water right before my eyes. I never saw the mother breach, but I watched her calf jump above the water over and over with youthful enthusiasm. The calf threw her head and body as high as she possibly could reach, flukes out-stretched as if in flight, then gravity stopped her, and gently but forcefully pushed her down where she met the water with a cymbal crash. One time, the calf jumped over her mother as she surfaced for air... as if to show off. The whale seemed to enjoy the audience as it stayed near to the boat and created larger and larger firework splashes with each “oooooo and “ahhhhhh” she heard.

Why do whales jump into the air as they do? Marine biologists still debate the topic. Some say they do it for communication, some say for recreation. What if they do it to test their boundaries? To whales, the air must be a shiny alien medium, and they are fortunate enough to visit it for a few seconds before gravity denies them complete access. It must feel strange for whales, who are weightless beneath the surface, to feel their immense mass for once. Maybe it's a feeling of power and freedom. Maybe they fear the surface, and they breach into it to test themselves, to test their natural boundaries.

This does not seem so absurd does it? We humans do the same. Water is an alien medium for humans. Sure, we can swim it, open our eyes and blow bubbles out our mouth and nose; but we can only visit it for a short while before our lungs demand air. Air is our medium... the space in which we humans thrive in. We are smooshed and violently stifled between gravity and the ground beneath. It's no wonder then, that we strive to push our natural limits.

Humans test our boundaries through space exploration, and even sea exploration. I'm baffled that we have left so much of the sea undiscovered. Every time explorers take the deep sea submersible "Alvin" into the deepest dark trenches of the world, they discover several new creatures. Humans have been on this earth for how long, and we still encounter alien species!

Off the shore of Santorini, Greece, I felt the weightlessness of scuba diving for the first time. Prior to diving, I never realized how heavy the equipment would be... who knew that a tank of air could have so much mass? Then I had a weight belt crushing my hip bones on top of that! When I stood up, the equipment leeches to me like a parasite. It was a part of me, but it pulled as if it wanted to tug my skin down in rings of sags. I couldn't wait to submerge beneath the cold Mediterranean. The transition from painful weight to the comforting water reminded me reversed drowning. I felt the bursting eagerness to leave my stifling medium of air, into water where I was more suited for.

Once under water, I breathed my first aquatic breath... a test of faith in my air tank. Then I swam forward and discovered the sensation of weightlessness... gravity did not matter so much here. I could swim up, down, and side to side... On one hand, I felt strange spending several minutes not touching anything, neither the ground nor the surface. I could even stay still,

“hovering” in the space between. There is a sort of freedom in both the weightlessness and conquering curiosity and fear...

I imagine that for a whale who spends the majority of its life underwater, breaching the surface with their tons of blubber and bones must feel ten times more strange than me scuba diving. To feel their weight for the first time, and wonder what weight even is.

I once watched an episode of the BBC sponsored documentary series “The Blue Planet”, in which a young orca whale killed a sea lion, but instead of devouring it right away, it balanced the lifeless body on its tale and flipped it nearly fifty feet high into the air over and over again. It was one of the most bazaar and breathtaking pieces of footage I’ve ever seen. The image sticks with me. Why would an orca do this? It did not do it for any logical reason known to biologists. Maybe it wanted to test the strange medium of air. Perhaps it wondered if it could toss the sea lion into the clouds. Maybe it simply wanted to know if the sea lion would fall back from the air.

But this is not logical! Why would such simple creatures like whales or humans test the unknown when they have everything they need in their respective mediums of water or air? What do they have to gain? Frank Herbert’s science fiction masterpiece *Dune* responds, “Deep in the human unconscious is the pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense. But the real universe is always one step beyond logic.” Perhaps there is a beauty in the absurd! A beauty in blind passion and “fruitless” excursions.

So as I watched this baby whale jump over and over into the air, meeting it with defeat, I couldn’t help but imagine it wanted to stay up there, for a few seconds longer. I wonder if the

cal I watched wanted to fly... to feel that sensation. To feel the power of her weight conquer gravity.