

The silence of the humpback whale

Humpback whale populations are declining in many parts of the world, entailing the loss of both their ecological functions and their magnificent music. This is not just an environmental crisis, but a moral catastrophe. The fate of the whales is a tragic loss for humans, who take pleasure in seeing them and hearing their songs. Far more significant on a moral scale, the whales' fate is unjust, a violation of our duty to protect innocent beings from undeserved suffering, in violation of their rights. It is profane, a violation of our duty of reverence. And it is cruel, a violation of our duty of compassion. How much of Earth's legacy of beautiful lives are we willing to trade away, in order to maintain an unmerited and unsustainable way of life?

I remember *Songs of the Humpback Whale*. This was the sensational 1970 recording of humpback whalesong that brought whales into the hearts of people around the world. As the whales courted in Hawaiian bays, their plaints were almost operatic in their drama, their lust, the lyricism of their songs. Friends gave us the LP when our daughter was born, so we could rock her to sleep to the whispers and whoops of the whales. As graduate students just moved to town with a new baby, we had nothing in the house but a mattress on the floor, a record player, and a load of firewood for the stove. The forest smell of the damp oak, the music of the whales, the warm, gently breathing weight of a new baby on my chest – this was what the world was created to be, I believed, nothing less or more. The baby slept soundly, dreaming maybe of rising and falling on a gentle swell, lulled by the music of the great whales.

Thirty years later, we moved to a cabin on the edge of a cove in south-east Alaska. That first day, the sun finally dropped below the mountains, leaving a pink glaze on the water. We slept to the wash of waves in the rockwrack. But not for long. A sudden call jolted us awake – a long, drawn-out squeal. *Did you hear that? What in god's name? A wolf howling?* – it might have been, but there were no wolves on the island and the sound was chestier than

wolves. An elephant trumpeting? – that's what it sounded like, but no mastodons had stomped these beaches for 10,000 years. Nothing we had ever heard matched the magnitude of that bleating. A ruckus of thunks and splashings sounded from the inlet, and then the night returned to its gentle swash. In the morning, we saw a distant pod of humpbacks, spouting clouds of sunlight.

That, we learned, was the feeding call of the humpback whale.

Although they are probably the very same whales that sing in Hawaii, the humpbacks of south-east Alaska add a different call to their repertoire when they migrate back to northern feeding grounds. All violin music in the Hawaiian bays, on the feeding grounds in Alaska, whales trumpet. The cacophony is part of their feeding ritual, unique to the south-east. A member of a pod circles deep, blowing bubbles the size of beach balls. The bubbles form a sort of cylinder, encircling a school of herring. Other whales swim below, herding the herring into a tight ball. A whale sounds the signal – that magnificent screech – and, jaws agape, all the whales drive powerfully upward through the panicked fish. They go so fast, they breach the surface, sailing half a body's length into the sky. Water streams from the baleen curtains that hold the herring in their maws. Gulls scream as

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whales fall back onto the water with all the grace of a school bus falling off a cliff.

When we are out fishing, we usually hear exhaling whales before we see the cloud of breath. One returning whale in our inlet rasped heavily every time he inhaled or exhaled. People could identify him from miles across the water. ‘Growler’, they called him. Other whales exhaled in long breaths that sounded exactly like someone was dragging an ice chest across the deck of a boat. But the most beautifully breathing whales were the silent ones in fog on the far side of the inlet. When they exhaled, a cloud of silver glitter formed over their curled backs and silently disappeared. One morning in Freshwater Bay, we glimpsed a whale that was sleeping, a big lump floating so close to the surface that we were glad not to have hit it. The whale’s great bulk rose with the inhalation, sank on the exhale, quietly, slowly, snoring on the swell.

This is the music of the humpback whales in Alaska.

The humpback whale population in south-east Alaska had been abundant and growing at about five per cent per year (Neilson et al, 2018). Until five years ago. By now, the numbers are down nearly 60%. Lots of things happened in that time. A perfect storm of ocean events shifted prey availability and quality – global warming, powerful El Niño conditions, an unprecedented “blob” of warm water in the Gulf of Alaska, harmful algal blooms. A concurrent mass die-off of seabirds signalled widespread prey shortages. Whales in south-east Alaska were visibly thin, and even the zooplankton were skinny, measuring lower levels of lipids. Glacier Bay and adjacent waters in Icy Strait usually nurture about ten new humpback calves every summer. Last year, there was one calf, and it disappeared. Most likely it died and, too thin to float, sank to the bottom of the bay. Imagine the music of a dead calf, the scurrying crabs and clicking shrimp, the swish of hagfish, the rasp of shark skin against the small flayed body.

No one knows if the whales have shifted feeding grounds, following dwindling bait fish, or if they have died. If that many

whales have died, one would expect a plague of dead whales washing up on beaches, but there were none. That might make sense; an emaciated whale may sink quickly, and then the pressures of the deep sea may hold the carcass on the sea-bottom, a banquet for the hungry ocean. Another plausible scenario is that whales, unable to store enough fat on the feeding grounds, set off for Hawaii nonetheless – and don’t make it. Whale numbers are down in Hawaii as well as up north. No one knows what will happen next to the humpback whale populations, but the trends – the rising temperatures of the water, the falling populations of feed-fish and zooplankton – draw a jagged falling line on graphs.

What exactly would be the nature of the wrong, if we were to let whale-song slip away, or worse, propel it into oblivion? There are a number of words to use, human beings being prodigious inventors of varieties of wrong-doing. If Inuit people have forty words for ‘snow’, as I am told, how many words does the western world have for ‘wrong’? I can think of five big ones. Tragedy. Injustice. Profanity. Cruelty. Disrespect.

1. Tragedy

When I look out my window now, the inlet is flat as silver-plate, dinged here and there by a merganser or loon. I watch for whale-spouts; although I can see five miles across the inlet and even farther in both directions, I do not find them. That is a true loss. Seeing whales makes me glad. So much larger than I am (a floating school bus), so mysterious in their underwater travels (the great migrations), so ponderously clever in their lifeways (the underwater nursing calves), so beautiful in their shining dives (the waterfalls from lifting flukes), so oddly wonderful (the stalked eyeballs that allow them to see into their own mouths), so full of life (the triumphant roar) – they lift me out of myself and invite me into something far greater than my paltry concerns, into the infinitude of evolution and the great mysteries of beautiful life. Simply to be in view of that is a joy, and when once I had the chance to move in close to a whale and

breathe in the whale's exhalation, I was overjoyed (until I learned about the bacteria in the exhaled breath).

I'm not alone. In our inlet, tourists on the tour-boat *Island Song* line the rails in bright raincoats, holding long-lensed cameras. They cheer when a whale spouts, a rejoicing we can hear a mile across the water. The scene makes me think of photos of sailors returning to port after the war – that eager, that glad, that crowded at the ship's rail. This is a mystery in itself, why humans are drawn so strongly to the great mammals, as strongly as they might be drawn to home after a war – but it seems to be so.

This joy is part of the instrumental value of whales, their worth as means to human ends. It is a value, but utterly egocentric and insulting, when you think about it, to imagine that the value of the whales is primarily their value to us. Imagine the long evolutionary journey of whales, dragging themselves onto the muddy shore, stalking the swamps on dog-like legs, swinging elongated heads, and then finally splashing back into salty water, their feet sucking mud, their mouthparts maybe mumbling like crabs, the air electric with thunderstorms maybe and erupting volcanoes. Imagine the slow movement of their nostrils to the top of their backs and the transformation of a tail into those splendid flukes, black tulips of the sea. Imagine the evolution of that hulking grace. And where did the baleen come from, and over how many million years, the feathery filters stuck with krill? And the songs: how many generations taught how many generations to sing songs so compelling that they outsold the Monkees? To what end? That I would smile at night to hear them howl? That's all?

Let us grant the terrible sadness we would feel if the whales disappeared. Let us grant the tragic unfolding of human folly. But let's reason past our own selfish interests. Apart from these, what exactly is wrong with letting whales slip into oblivion?

2. Injustice

With the whales and all of Earth's beings, we share the kinship of common

substance, the kinship of common origins, the kinship of interdependence, and – perhaps disastrously – the kinship of a common fate. There are no natural hierarchies of deserving in this planet-wide family. If we and whales have evolved as interdependent and equally remarkable parts of a morally worthy whole, then we acknowledge also the *moral* unity of all life. So, a planetary argument by analogy unfolds: Just as humans ascribe intrinsic value to themselves, value beyond their usefulness to others, so the rest of creation too has intrinsic value. Just as humans grant legal and moral consideration to their own interests, so the interests of all others are worthy of consideration. And just as humans grant themselves rights that protect their most necessary interests, so the rest of creation too has the right to protection of their essential interests.

Industrial-age humans have been slow to realize that all members of the Earth community have rights. Steeped in self-glorifying narratives of human superiority over the rest of the natural world, intoxicated by seemingly limitless power to turn nature to human uses, blinkered by short-term self-interest, humans have chosen to reserve rights for themselves. However, the narrative of human exceptionalism is increasingly challenged by a notable convergence of religious, indigenous, ecological and evolutionary insights. We understand now that not only human beings, but other living beings, species, ecological communities, landscape formations and waters, have interconnected *interests*. Humans are morally obliged to recognize and to weigh these interests in decisions that impact nature. That is to say, other-than-human members of the Earth community also have *rights*, and those *rights* count.

Accordingly, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth and other legal and moral documents around the world encode nature's rights as a "common standard of achievement." The rights include, among many others, the right to life and to exist; the right to regenerate its biocapacity and to continue its vital cycles

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and processes free from human disruptions; the right to be free from contamination, pollution, and toxic or radioactive waste; and the right to maintain its identity and integrity as a distinct, self-regulating, and interrelated being.

Damage to the whales – whether by overfishing their food species, acidifying the very water they swim in, degrading the zooplankton they feed on, warming the water (the list is long) – violates their rights. And it is a particularly pernicious violation, because the whales are the very definition of innocent, having done nothing to deserve this cruelty.

3. Profanity

Let me tell you about one day a dozen years ago – a special day, but not a unique day. The whales had been feeding in the inlet, but they were resting now on the glaze of the sea, and our boat rested some distance away. There were many whales. They all sucked bright day into their lungs, blew it out with the sound of a rockslide. Then there was silence except for the whispers of murrelets and the flicks of the fins of wounded fish. Already, the sea had melted the rough water, skinning it with silver. Gulls swayed on the swell, and even the sacrilegious gulls were silent.

A whale folded its back, slowly unfolded, and levered its flukes into the air. The tail stood like a black jib, streaming water, then sank as the whale dived to a seam below the reach of the sun. Water slipped into the space the whale had pressed on the sea. One by one, other whales raised their flukes and dove. The gulls, still silent, waited. They knew that in their own time, the whales would begin the hunt again. The water rose and fell in meditative breath.

I don't want to say that moment felt like a spiritual experience, because I don't want to default to human comparisons, but it felt somehow sanctified. That moment, and those whales, were irreplaceable, essential, beautiful and fearsome, astonishing, beyond human understanding, generative, wonderful. If this is the language of the sacred, then let us use those words. This is the sanctity that we must protect, the

endlessly creative world that we must save, the lyric voices that we must hear, the wonder that we must preserve.

Every extinction, every suffering, every destruction, is a profanity, a failure of reverence. It is a violence we cannot even begin to measure because we have only the sorriest understanding of the world's multitude of lives. The world is a mystery of infinite and intrinsic value.

4. Cruelty

None of us can directly experience the pain or sorrow felt by another creature. We infer it from cries and pleas, and from analogy to what we ourselves would feel. The sorrow of a mother whale, faithfully nursing her calf through the watery nights, but too starved herself to provide the nutrients to keep the little one alive – what agony is this? It might be less than you or I would feel, but it might as likely be more, the breaking of a great whale's heart. One might argue that a whale doesn't have the mental capacity – the consciousness or self-awareness – to grieve. One might argue that she doesn't remember pain – a merciful amnesia. But these would be arguments from ignorance; we just don't know. But we can imagine.

If there are any limits to permissible human behaviour, then surely cruelty to innocent creatures is beyond the pale. Pain inflicted as an unseen and unintended consequence of activities aimed at other, maybe admirable, goals; pain inflicted as a foreseen but discounted consequence of other activities; pain inflicted knowingly and intentionally as part of a business plan to drive up corporate profits – here is an escalating scale of shameful behaviour. As we think about the extinction crisis, as we count down the numbers, as we calculate the rate of ecosystem collapse, it is essential to remember that the crisis shimmers with suffering. That makes it not just an environmental crisis, but a moral catastrophe.

5. Disrespect

A great whale is a wondrous thing. It is *astonishing*, from the Latin, *tonus*, to be struck, as if by lightning – radical

amazement, to see such a creature, so tuned to the flashing fish and the dark sea. It is beautiful, the glistening blue-black back decorated with barnacles, studded with scars from cookie-cutter sharks, a mammoth animal, but graceful as flowing water. It is knowing, as elders are knowing, having seen the world's cruelty and promise. It is magnificent beyond human measure, slowly folding and unfolding through time. It is roaring grand. It is eager for on-going life. It is a trembling consciousness, a manifestation of the mind of the universe.

It is worthy – that's the word. It is excellent. And so it must continue. And the thought that we humans might trade the humpback whale, for what? The profligate burning of oil and gas? Profits from a reckless herring fishery? A failure to imagine a sustainable way to live on Earth? Greed, pure and simple? That is moral monstrosity on a cosmic scale. It's time for a new global conversation about the true worth of the world's great diversity of lives – not in the pinched terms of human financial or emotional interests, but in terms of the 'great journey of the universe' toward an abundance of ongoing life.

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Last year, under gathering clouds, I knelt beside a tide-pool. Maybe you have done the same. Blue mussels paved the rocks, cutting my hand when I turned a stone. The bottom of the stone was slathered

with life – tiny starfish, algae like orange paint, crust-of-bread sponges, porcelain crabs disguised as pebbles, decorator crabs disguised as seaweed, fish disguised as rays of light. The moving tide was noisy, the harsh inhale and groan. Scratching claws and bubbling jaws, a constant *plop plop* as seawater dripped off globules and tentacles and who knows what. Behind me, I could hear my grandsons calling to each other, "Guys! Come. Look and see." And then, out in the inlet, a humpback whale began to roar.

Never have I heard as complete a repudiation of the idea that human beings are the only wondrous beings, that we are in charge, that we are the point of the whole thing. Each being is worthy. Each fractal layer is necessary, all the lives the theme, all the lives the variations. The planet is still crammed with lives of urgent striving, crawling over each other, burrowing into every crack, floating on the seas. The fate of these lives is not a matter of indifference or of economic expediency. These lives are the irreplaceable consequence of planetary creativity over four billion years. As consequences of the same creativity, we human beings have obligations to honour the Earth's beings and the processes that created them, to celebrate and protect them until the end of time. ■

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