

# Guided by whales

They've changed our lives.  
Now it's time to save theirs.



Rebecca Pillsbury

# **Guided by Whales**

*By Rebecca Pillsbury*

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*Cover Design by Antonio Garcia Martin*

*Published by Duende Press*

*ISBN: 978-0-9915254-2-3*

*To all animals in captivity, everywhere*

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## INTRODUCTION

In many Northwest Coast Native cultures, it is believed that whales have access to all the information that exists in the universe. To come into contact with them—even to catch sight of one—is considered an omen portending acquisition of vast spiritual powers. The whale is revered as a guide that leads to the discovery of the meaning of one’s own life.

Not everyone’s perception of cetaceans is as climactic. But for those who are fortunate enough to have spent time with these powerful creatures of the sea, it cannot be denied that there is something extraordinary about them. By virtue of their sheer size, the abundance of life energy they possess is greater than that of any other creature; their physical presence, therefore, is something we not only see but most likely feel.

It’s a feeling that is universally difficult to describe. Even as a writer, I find that words completely fail me. All I know is, similar to others featured in this book, the whales called out to me. Energetically, emotionally, spiritually—something inside of them reached out to something inside of me and said, *Come along*.

The ways in which I responded to that calling have mostly been subtle and difficult to isolate. I could say I was touched by their beauty and intrigue ever since I saw orcas in the movie *Free Willy* at the age of eleven. I was living in Wisconsin and had never seen the ocean, but suddenly I knew I had to be close to it. After college, I moved to Oregon and made as many trips to the coast as I could.

My first time seeing those majestic mammals in the wild was alongside my parents, who were visiting. Fittingly, a female killer whale was resting with a calf beside a rock off Ecola State Park (the park itself is named after the Chinook word for *whale*). They were quite a distance away, but my excitement could not be contained. I screamed. Even from afar, they were stunning.

I wanted more, but I felt I lacked the educational background to get any closer—to be out on the water with the whales, daily if possible, which would require earning money while doing so. I had flirted with the idea of studying marine biology in college, but when I saw all the chemistry and physics classes I’d have to take, I turned toward what felt safer for my right-brained being, communication studies.

I went on to pursue various careers over the following years, including owning a petsitting business. I’d always loved animals, and that was one way to get paid for being around them. But the dilemma always nagged—what I loved more than anything were really *big* animals. Those that weighed anywhere from 400 pounds to 150 tons, for example. Hardly house pets.

After the visit with my parents, my next notable experience seeing whales in the wild came after enrolling in a volunteer program through Oregon State Parks called Whale Watching Spoken Here. After attending the two-day training, volunteers are stationed at lookout points along the coast during peak gray whale migration periods. I was there to answer questions and help visitors spot whales—though I had never seen a gray whale myself! About halfway through that first day, I did, however. This time, I cried.

I was reminded of that calling—come along. That whisper that every time I came closer became louder and more profound. It would not be ignored, try as life might to suppress it. I did learn that it could be quieted. It became like a seed lying dormant for the winter, waiting

for me to shine some light on it. I finally did, when I realized I did not need to have an academic science background to immerse myself in the topic. I could do what I already did: write. After publishing my first book in 2014 and even before publishing a subsequent book in 2016, I knew what the topic of my third book would be about. I had to write about whales. However, it turned out that the book I'd had in mind to write had already been written. *Of Orcas and Men: What Killer Whales Can Teach Us* faced me down in a bookstore in Bellingham, Washington. I bought that book, and it was beautiful. Way better than I could have written, I admitted. So, what angle would I take with my book now? I wondered. I already had a plethora of research I'd conducted that could be repurposed in many different ways.

While attending the Marine Naturalist Training Program through the Whale Museum in Friday Harbor, Washington in 2017, I answered that question. Numerous participants stood up and declared their reason for being there: "I wanted to become a marine biologist so I could study whales, but I didn't want to take all those science classes." There were so many people just like me in this regard—not wanting to channel our passion for whales through formal study but through environmental protection and lifelong learning. I could write a book for us.

The more I read during the research process, the more I realized how interconnected everything is—not just the ecosystem but our effects on it. People in every career could help protect the whales. In other words, we don't have to be marine biologists.

Cetacean field research is a pretty demanding lifestyle that requires time away from family, fierce competition for funding, extremely uncomfortable conditions, and potentially unrelenting sea sickness. If that is what you want, then by all means, go forth, my friends, and become marine biologists. But most people have other callings in life that are even greater.

This book follows the journeys of twenty-two people whose lives have been "guided by whales" but not necessarily ruled by them. Through artistic, political, educational, and yes, scientific endeavors, they heeded an inner calling to do something about the precarious state cetaceans are in, that state existing mostly as the result of thoughtless human behavior.

This book seeks to demonstrate how many different paths can be taken to answer the same calling I myself felt from the whales. We don't have to be scientists—in fact, what the world needs as much as scientists are people who can touch human hearts and perhaps encourage change in human thought and behavior.

Individual and collective action is needed more than ever to ensure a future where whales—and even our own species—can exist. The survival of us both depends on the existence of a habitable planet. And right now, we humans aren't doing so well with keeping our earth and our oceans sustainable.

Here are just a few of the critical threats facing cetaceans today that are explored in this book:

- Habitat degradation
- Prey depletion
- Entanglement in fishing gear
- Ship strikes
- Toxic contamination

- Oil and gas development
- Whaling
- Captivity
- Climate change

These concerns and what can be done about them are woven within personal stories, since I believe personal story to be one of the best ways to inspire, educate, and motivate individuals. If these people can make a difference, why can't we? The Pacific Northwest is an epicenter for conservation efforts and cetacean sightings (and the region in which I myself reside), so it is generously represented.

Here are the inspirational stories of artists, filmmakers, educators, naturalists, nonprofit administrators, and researchers and biologists too. Here also are the stories of members of Indigenous cultures whose tribes have been guided by whales since well before European contact created so many of the problems cetaceans face today.

In many Native coastal cultures, it is believed that whales have access to all of the information that exists in the universe. If we listen to what they have to teach us, if we respond to that whisper—*come along; follow me*—we may be surprised as to what we discover.



# I

## BIOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY, AND INTELLIGENCE

At some point, every human ponders the essence of what it means to be alive. *Who am I? Where did I come from? What is the meaning of life? What is my greater purpose?*

To come to a conclusion regarding any of those questions, a considerable amount of time for study or reflection is required. Before modernization, moments of leisure were hard to come by—basic requirements of survival consumed our time and energy. Now that everything from electricity to dishwashers to meal delivery services has become normalized, we have enough time to mull over existential questions.

Except, we don't. We tend to fill newly acquired space in our lives with other personal, social, and work pursuits. It makes me wonder what we're missing. Just as much, it makes me wonder what other creatures, who have not allowed themselves to be trapped by technology and convenience, aren't missing—what they have figured out. Here with us on earth, there are mammals that have been evolving for over 50 million years, as opposed to modern man's two hundred thousand years. Members of that same order possess brains that are up to seven times larger than ours. Surely, those mammals have figured something out about life that we haven't yet.

American novelist Cormac McCarthy suggested in his unpublished screenplay *Whales and Men* that the enormous mind of the whale possesses the key to understanding creation. After all, some whale species go for months without eating; others have no natural predators and thus require no expenditure of energy to escape. Some have been known to live over one hundred years. What do they do with all that time? What do they process with those enormous brains?

John Lilly, a neuroscientist and writer who explored human consciousness and dolphin communication, believed it likely that they contemplate the universe. McCarthy fantasized that to be true. In his play, he envisioned God returning to earth to ask humans if they've figured out they could pose their existential questions to the whale. In a twist, God then looks about and asks where the whales have gone.

If McCarthy's and Lilly's suppositions are true—and our planet loses this valuable resource to extinction—our own species could be left posing existential questions for all of eternity. We probably will anyway, but nevertheless, it is compelling to consider that we have in our great oceans—at least for now—a remarkably aware species that has survived first on land and later in the sea for millions of years. Ask anyone who has looked into the eye of a whale, and they will tell you that its depth reaches far beyond what can be seen in any other animal or human form.

These are species with biology, sociological structures, and intelligence so highly advanced that it's impossible to fully grasp just how exceptional these characteristics are. They are species that spend their lives submerged in a substance within which we cannot survive. Nevertheless, we try our best to understand them with the tools we have available to us.

Much of what we know about whales and dolphins today comes from observing them in the wild, in captivity, and in the flesh—by performing necropsies on carcasses that have washed ashore. In order for us to better absorb the topics that will be addressed later in this book, I offer some

background information on the biology and sociology of this book's three most commonly discussed species of cetaceans: orcas, humpback whales, and gray whales.

More research has been conducted on orcas than on any other cetacean species, due to their accessibility. Some of the wild members of this species frequent areas in close proximity to humans. Their smaller size and sociability means they are easier to capture and hold in captivity, where they are further studied. So, please note that their attributes are discussed in this book more than some other species of cetaceans—though knowing more about the rest would undoubtedly prove to be equally fascinating.

## **Biology of Cetaceans**

Whales, dolphins, and porpoises are believed to have descended from land animals that returned to the water roughly 50 million years ago after having lived on land. These marine mammals compose the order of Cetacea, which consists of around ninety different species of animals. Cetaceans can further be broken down as either toothed whales (i.e., sperm whales, beaked whales, beluga whales, dolphins, and porpoises) or baleen whales (i.e., gray, humpback, blue, minke, fin, and bowhead whales).

Most toothed whales are smaller than baleen whales but eat larger prey (such as fish, squid, seals, sea lions, and even other members of the cetacean order); their sleeker and smaller shape makes them faster and therefore better hunters. Instead of teeth, baleen whales have plates with bristles attached to their upper jaws, which are used to filter their food in the water; they eat small prey such as fish, krill, and plankton.

Aside from size and how and what they eat, differences between toothed whales and baleen whales include how they breathe, communicate with each other, and socialize. Toothed whales breathe through only one blowhole, while baleen whales have two blowholes (their blow appears to be heart-shaped, if viewed from in front or behind).

Breathing is conscious for both toothed and baleen whales. Only one half of their brain shuts down while they sleep, while the other half stays on the lookout for predators and obstacles and remembers to surface to breathe. After about two hours, the sides of the brain reverse, and the rested half awakens. Curiously, humpback and sperm whales have also been witnessed sleeping while hanging vertically, with their tails or noses poking out of the water.

To communicate, toothed whales use their blowhole to create high-pitched clicking and whistling sounds. They also rely on echolocation (the reflection of sound) to locate food, avoid predators, and navigate in the dark ocean. Toothed whales are expert stalkers who rarely vocalize while hunting.

Baleen whales communicate by producing loud, deep, low-pitched moans that can be heard from miles away; they are not dependent on echolocation as are their toothed counterparts. Interestingly, both species of cetaceans react to our music (when played live, not as a recording), since it resembles their own mode of communication. It is a phenomenon first described by the ancient Greeks.

Toothed whales tend to have more sophisticated social structures than baleen whales, partly because they require working together in order to hunt larger prey. Many whale pods, or social groups, have established social hierarchies and can be seen playing games together and teaching each other survival strategies. Certain cetaceans demonstrate their own cultures that are not unlike human cultures; they develop close relationships with family and friends and even mourn the deaths of members of their social families.

## Social Lives of Orcas

Some of the more incredible examples that illustrate what make orcas (used interchangeably with their common name of killer whale) both different from and similar to humans are found in their social lives. When a killer whale gives birth, one or more adult “midwives” help the newborn to the surface to take its first breath. Orca society is strongly matriarchal; both female and male offspring stay with mom’s family group for life. This social structure permits older whales to teach younger whales their territorial landmarks and the location and timing of their available prey.

The amygdala, or the part of the brain that’s associated with emotional learning and long-term memories, is highly developed in orcas—suggesting that they could be retaining intergenerational memories. In fact, it has been observed that the orcas of the Puget Sound waters near Seattle, Washington, do not return to places where members of their families were captured—not even those who were born after the captures occurred go there.

For such a social animal, an abundance of empathy is mandatory; the whale brain has therefore evolved to expand this emotional trait, and the animals have learned to use it to their advantage. After a successful hunt, they share the food. Males have been observed leaving the best fishing holes for females and babies. Healthy whales have been seen supporting injured or sick whales.

There is a culture based on cooperation; there are hierarchies of dominance, led by the matriarchs, but there’s little sign of competition. When the Resident orcas of the Salish Sea (the network of coastal waterways that includes the southwestern portion of British Columbia, Canada, and the northwestern portion of Washington State) encounter other family groups and create a superpod, they display a ritual greeting ceremony to express their elation and joy.

Resident (fish-eating) and Transient (mammal-eating) orcas, although very rarely violent toward each other, do not mingle or interbreed. They have their own communication calls and cultural behaviors and more or less respect each other’s territorial zones. Perhaps these mammals coexist peacefully because they live in transparency; their highly evolved sonar allows them to detect not only physical conditions (such as cancer, tumors, and strokes) but emotional states in each other. They can “see” inside of each other (and humans!) by transmitting sound waves. If a male orca wanted to compete with another male for a female, the interested parties would be able to determine the winner in advance simply by sensing each other’s physical capabilities and emotional states—no fight needed.

What a whale assesses through the use of echolocation is also shared; if an orca mother transmits a sound wave, the results of that transmission are heard by her baby and other orcas in the vicinity. There are no secrets in orca society. Astonishingly, the amount of information they receive through sending a sound wave is twenty times the amount of information humans can receive with their hearing (which is also more than humans can perceive through vision—the primary sense for most of us).

Perhaps even more astounding is the ability of certain species of whales to instantaneously convey an image to each other—an orca can send an image of a fish to another orca hundreds of miles away, for example. This begs the question, if they can read each other’s minds as well as see inside a human’s physical body, can they also read human minds? Further, can they pick up on the energy of humans and even of objects?

Passengers on a Washington State ferry were in awe in the fall of 2013 when the vessel was surrounded by nearly three dozen orcas who appeared to be joyously celebrating. It was a spectacular event within itself but was made even more magnificent since the ferry was carrying five hundred ancient artifacts of the Suquamish tribe. After fighting for decades to get these artifacts back on their land, the tribe rejoiced as the relics made their way from a museum in Seattle. The orcas seemed to be rejoicing too.

Orcas have been interwoven into the Suquamish tribe's cultural and spiritual practices since ancient times. Were the orcas able to pick up on the energy of the artifacts? Or the celebration in the thoughts of the tribe members? Or the spiritual significance of the artifacts on board?

No matter if they can read our minds and emotional states or not—it cannot be denied that whales possess a powerful sense of empathy not only for each other but for humans. Orcas are unique among apex predators (predator at the top of the food chain) in that they do not harm life forms they choose not to eat. Lucky for us, despite the many reasons we have given them to go against their makeup and harm us, they have agreed not to eat us. Perhaps it's their large amygdala that's responsible for their colossal ability to forgive. For whatever reason, they have decided we are worth sparing—and sometimes even establishing friendships with.

There have been several cases in which orcas have initiated contact with humans in an effort to play; they have a sense of humor and cleverness that rivals their human counterparts'. Some people even report orcas working in collaboration with humans; Australian whalers had a history of killing baleen whales and leaving the lips and tongues for the orcas to enjoy before collecting the rest of the remains. In what appeared to be an exchange, the orcas would protect the whalers when they were endangered by sharks.

The Kwakiutl tribe of the Pacific Northwest Coast maintains stories of how killer whales have saved their people from drowning or shown them where to find food in times of famine. Many Native coastal tribes consider it taboo to harm an orca; it is widely believed that if people kill an orca, the orca's family will seek revenge the next time the humans are out on the water.

Orcas are considered by many Native peoples to be not just our friends but our ancestors—loved ones whose spirits have returned to live under the sea. It is common to see killer whales carved into totem poles and family crests—the animal's spirit is foremost in power and prestige.

## **Social Lives of Humpback Whales**

In general, humpback whales are solitary creatures that prefer traveling alone or in small groups of two or three. However, several dozen whales may come together to cooperatively meet their biological needs of hunting, migrating, and mating.

A pod may consist solely of a mother whale and her child or one or two friends who have formed a temporary loose bond. Friendships between female humpbacks have been witnessed, however, such that the same females reunite multiple years in a row during the summer breeding season. Interestingly, those that had the most stable relationships gave birth to the most calves.

Humpbacks embark on one of the longest migration routes of any species; they are known to travel as far as sixteen thousand miles from their summer cold-water feeding grounds to their winter warm-water breeding grounds. Mature whales have been witnessed traveling ahead of the younger whales, leading them to their established migration destinations.

Humpback whales have a unique bubble-net feeding technique where a group of whales circles prey, blowing bubbles to herd the school of fish into a tight ball. Loud vocal sounds are also used to scare the fish to the water's surface, after which the whales slap their fins against the water to stun the fish. Once the fish are immobilized, the whales swim up and lunge at them with open mouths. They take in hundreds of thousands of small fish with each gulp; they filter the meal through their baleen bristles (made of keratin, the same substance as human fingernails) to avoid digesting water.

During mating season, humpback whales rarely (if at all) feed; they live off the blubber (fat) reserves acquired during the feeding season, which allows them to focus on the more pressing task at hand. An extraordinary display of acrobatics (breaching, lunging, and tail slapping) accompanies mating season and is believed to be a method of communication that demonstrates male dominance and physical prowess. Charging at other males is another way to win a female mate, although it is rare that serious harm is inflicted.

In contrast to using aggression, there are populations of male humpback whales who are notably gentle and known as the singers. Their sound is created by pushing air out of the blowhole. Each "song" can last over twenty minutes, the "concert" can continue for more than twenty-four hours, and this "music" can be heard many miles away. Whales that are miles apart sometimes harmonize; they have even been known to change their songs already in progress to be in harmony with other whales.

Since these songs are performed by groups of males during mating season, scientists suspect the melodic vocalizations have something to do with attracting a mate. Their mating songs can sometimes be misunderstood by human ears to be the moans and whines made when the whales lose a friend or family member or feel lonely, but those are different sounds that also demonstrate their ability to feel emotion and empathy.

The only known predators to hunt humpback whales are orcas, which also cooperatively hunt baby gray whales. Orcas are rarely successful in carrying out a humpback kill, however, as humpback whales are considerably larger. In contrast, humpback whales are known as the sea's protectors and have been seen aiding not just members of their own species who are in danger but members of multiple other species. There are hundreds of recorded incidents of humpbacks coming to the aid of gray whale calves, seals, sea lions, and porpoises being hunted by orcas.

One humpback whale was even filmed protecting a human diver who was at the mercy of a tiger shark. Biologist Nan Hauser was diving off the Cook Islands in the South Pacific in September 2017 when the shark started stalking her. The humpback approached and guided her out of harm's way, first tucking her under its pectoral fin and then lifting her out of the water onto its back. Perhaps such apparent acts of altruism are why humpback whales earned the nickname "gentle giants."

## **Social Lives of Gray Whales**

Like humpback whales, gray whales typically travel alone or in small, fluid groups. Associations among individuals mostly consist of mother-calf pairs. However, they may form larger groups when on feeding and breeding grounds.

Gray whales are one of the primary cetaceans contributing to the whale watching industry. Their predictable, near-shore migration route—alongside humpback whales, the longest of any species—makes them easy marks, as does their annual breeding routine in the lagoons of Baja California,

Mexico. Before they were whale watching icons, however, they were heavily targeted by whalers for their oil.

Initially, gray whales existed in three distinct populations: Eastern North Pacific, Western North Pacific, and North Atlantic. The latter became the first and so far only whale species driven to extinction. The remaining populations are protected species, and hunting them is illegal.

The Eastern North Pacific population has recovered from near extinction to the point where, in 1995, it became the first whale to be removed from the United States' endangered species list. Today, an estimated twenty thousand gray whales make up the population, which is approximately equal to pre-whaling estimates. The Western Pacific population, however, has not recovered from whaling and is believed to be close to extinction.

One of the contributing factors to the recovery of the Eastern North Pacific gray whale (also known as the California gray whale) could be that they are the only baleen whales to feed mainly on bottom-dwelling organisms—therefore, they have little competition for food. As bottom-feeders, the whales hunt by swimming to the bottom of the ocean, turning on their sides, scooping up sediments that contain small organism prey, and filtering out the water through their baleen plates. An adult gray whale eats approximately two thousand four hundred pounds of food per day while in its summer feeding grounds.

Another possible reason for their ability to repopulate is their migration pattern, which makes it easy to encounter potential mates. Every October, small groups of Eastern North Pacific gray whales make their way from feeding grounds in the Bering and Chukchi Seas to the southern Gulf of California and the Baja California Peninsula of Mexico, where they mate and give birth. The migration takes an average of two to three months to complete, as they travel throughout the day and night for a total of up to nearly fourteen thousand miles.

Gray whales choose shallow waters to give birth, which is a practice believed to help prevent their calves from being attacked by killer whales, which are the only known predator of gray whales, aside from illegal human poachers and hunters. Despite the latter, the gray whale-human relationship has pretty much done a one-eighty since the days of commercial hunting. The whale was nicknamed “devilfish” by whalers, due to its aggressive nature and tendency to fight back when it felt threatened. Today, a thriving whale watching industry exists in the very birthing lagoons in Mexico where they were nearly driven to extinction.

Although people are allowed to touch gray whales in Mexico (it is illegal in United States waters), the whale watching industry in Mexico is highly regulated and known for its ethical policies and practices. The number of boats that can be out on the water at any given time is restricted, as are the areas boats can enter. No boats can enter the southern inlet or upper lagoon of San Ignacio Lagoon, where calves are nurtured. In addition, boats must maintain a particular distance from the whales; if passengers are able to touch the whales, it is because the whales came to the boat on their own accord.

About 10 percent of the whales in the Baja Peninsula birthing lagoons are what have been dubbed “friendlies.” These whales regularly approach boats, allowing themselves to be pet and kissed by eager and enthusiastic humans. Some mothers even nudge their calves up to the boats, as if teaching them to inspect this curious other species. The whale's ability to trust humans is quite remarkable, as many of the whales that return to the lagoons are old enough to remember having been hunted in the area. One particularly popular whale, known as Scarback (gray whales have been

photo identified and cataloged according to unique physical features), even bears the wound of a harpoon—but remains one of the friendlies.

Whereas humpback males can show aggression when competing for females, gray whales practice cooperative sharing of the females. There are even reports of male gray whales taking turns supporting the female while she copulated with another male. Perhaps that practice is another reason the California gray whale has managed to recover after being heavily hunted! Once sexually mature, female gray whales spend 80 percent of their lives pregnant or lactating. Unlike the endangered and highly toxic Southern Resident killer whales that frequent the waters of the Salish Sea, gray whale calves have a good chance of surviving past infancy.

## **The Most Intelligent Species on Earth**

Although all cetaceans demonstrate unique aspects of intelligence, the species that has captured the most interest among the public is the orca, or killer whale. The name *killer whale* is a misnomer in more ways than one. Orcas are members of the dolphin family and are not killers in terms of exhibiting aggression or attacks on humans. Basque whalers witnessed orcas killing baleen whales and labeled them *ballenas asesinas*, “whale killers.” The name was mistranslated into English and is still popularly used.

The orca species can be broken down into four distinct populations that look nearly identical but are genetically, behaviorally, and culturally different. The Southern Resident killer whale population is perhaps the most beloved and well-studied of all orca communities, due to their proximity to human activity. This population summers in the waters of the southern Salish Sea around British Columbia and Washington and winters as far south as Central California.

The Northern Resident killer whale population also frequents the Salish Sea, although primarily resides farther north than the Southern Residents. The Transient killer whale population passes through the same region but does not tend to stay for long as their geographic territory extends as far as from Alaska to California. Finally, there are the Offshore killer whales, of whom little is known, as they travel so far out to sea that human contact and observation are extremely limited.

Orcas are believed to have the second-largest and second-heaviest brains of any mammal, after sperm whales (some contest that an adult orca brain is larger than a sperm whale brain). Size isn't necessarily indicative of intelligence, but it's also worth noting that the killer whale's cerebral cortex is much more convoluted than the human cortex. This suggests a complex brain, driven by the social intricacy and highly communicative lifestyle of these top predators of the ocean. Baleen whales, which do not have to socialize and hunt for their food, do not have brains as large as toothed whales, although their size and structure also suggest a high level of complexity.

## **What We Can Learn from Whales**

We humans tend to perceive all animals as less intelligent than ourselves because they do not think or communicate like humans. However, if we open our minds to the possibility that our species is limited by our own brain's inability to experience and understand these giant and mysterious creatures who live in an underwater world we can't fully penetrate, we might begin to think more like Cormac McCarthy, John Lilly, or Native peoples. As all of them suggest, perhaps whales do have access to all of the information that exists in the universe.

To reiterate their sentiments, the next time we find ourselves pondering existential questions, we may be wise to look to the whales for answers. And perhaps rather than think, what we really need to do is feel. The following stories offer unique examples of how people have used whales as guides— messengers capable of communicating wisdom without the use of words. These individuals' lives have been forever altered as a result of having listened.



(Excerpted from SECTION II: CAPTIVITY)

**ROSIE CAYOU-JAMES: *Our Orca Ancestors***

Rosie Cayou-James can captivate an audience without the use of words. She is a powerful storyteller, but it is her presence that draws people in first. Her movements are thoughtful, like the words she carefully selects and delivers. When she looks at you, you have the feeling she is looking straight into your soul. It is how one might describe what it's like to look into the eye of a whale.

It cannot be denied that, like orcas are, Rosie is a keeper of great wisdom. It is a wisdom that has been cultivated from her own life experiences and the experiences of her elders that have been passed on to her. Not all of those stories can be told, however. In some cases, she must first determine if an audience is worthy; in others, she must ask herself if the story is hers to tell.

Those who have the opportunity to hear her speak—whether it be through outreach she conducts on behalf of the Samish Indian Nation or through various events hosted by Orca Network—have been offered a unique honor. To listen to her stories about the orcas is to learn about the history of her people.

**R**osie's father kept some stories secret, even from his daughter. He didn't open up to her about just how much the orcas meant to him until the day he lost some of them. That day was August 8, 1970. Eighty orcas were herded into Penn Cove off Whidbey Island, Washington. Six whales were captured, and five additional were killed in the process. Rosie and her father were there to witness what her father called an "abduction."

She shared her story: "To see those whales being hoisted up like that...to see parts of their fins or tails sticking out of those nets...To my dad, it was like watching his own children being kidnapped. He said that aside from losing our land, losing his family—the orcas—was the most devastating time in his life."

Her father, sitting on the beach inside the cove that day, apologized to the whales in their language. He told them that he didn't know where they were taking them, but he promised to go there and get them back. "That never happened," Rosie lamented. Her father passed before anything could be done, but she has taken up his fight.

Tokitae, also known as Lolita, is the last surviving orca from the Puget Sound captures in the 1960s and '70s. She is being held at Miami Seaquarium, where she still performs daily. Rosie crusades for her release, using storytelling as a means to raise public awareness regarding the cruelty of captivity. "If that tank is their home, that tank is their toilet. And they've got to swim in it. That is inhumane," she said.

Captivity is not the only concern she has for the whales. For her beloved Southern Resident killer whales, it's the dwindling supply of salmon. "As humans, we are spoiled," she began. "We can go out and buy anything we want to eat, and many times that's salmon." She paused for emphasis before continuing, "Meanwhile, our family of orcas are starving to death."

And it's not just the orcas who are hungry—it's gray whales too. In April of 2010, Rosie received a call from Orca Network's Howard Garrett and Susan Berta. There was a deceased gray whale beached on Samish Island, and they were wondering if she and her partner, Tsulton, could go over

and help “feed the spirit of the whale.” The whale had been attempting to feed in the sand before she died.

“We went out there, but we couldn’t find anywhere without a ‘no trespassing’ sign on the island that we once owned,” Rosie remarked. “We drove around until we pulled over in a little grassy area. We knew we were going to get approached and probably kicked off. A man came down to see what we were doing, but when we told him, he said, ‘You are welcome.’ We walked a good mile until we could reach the whale.”

The couple performed their ceremony. “Tsulton went out there and gently captured her spirit. She wanted to come to him; she didn’t know what direction to go. He turned around toward the ocean, and he let her spirit go. He had tears; he was shaking his head. I asked him if there was anything I could do, and he said, ‘No, she’s fine now. Her family fed her. Her spirit was starving for its natural food, but it could only find one shrimp.”

When the whale was later dissected, only one sand shrimp was found in her stomach. The rest was sawdust. There had been a sawmill at the location many years ago, and the sediment in the area was still polluted with its remains.

Although Rosie realized the gravity of the situation, she didn’t allow herself to get caught up in despair. Her humor prevailed: “I wish we had a food bank for the whales...over at that bank there’s shrimp for the gray whales, and over at that bank there’s salmon for the Residents.” She chuckled before her tone turned more serious.

“At some point I would like to reach out to fishermen to ask—and this is a big request, but it’s for the future of both whales and humans—that they don’t set nets in the water for four years. That’s what orcas mean to me. Because without salmon, the Resident orcas are going to die, and the seals are going to die. And without seals, the Transient orcas could die.”

That experience of feeding the gray whale’s spirit led Orca Network to ask the couple to conduct an annual ceremony on the anniversary of the Penn Cove captures. Every August 8 from the Coupeville, Washington, dock, Rosie, Tsulton, and members of the concerned public feed the spirit of the orcas who were captured and those who died. Salmon is laid on a bed of cedar branches and allowed to drift out to sea as songs and stories are shared.

Rosie has undertaken other means to help feed and free the orcas. She is active in efforts to promote salmon habitat restoration, and she advocates for whale watching in the wild versus in captivity. She is hopeful about the future. “I think that the public is catching on. Now, if they want to see a whale, they want to see them in their natural habitat. Instead of flying to Florida for SeaWorld, people are taking the time to come up here and look off a bank or go out on a whale watching boat.”

After working at the Samish Nation for fifteen years and through all of her presentations, she has witnessed this shift in public perception. “There’s a core group of people in every town who are going to keep reeling in more people. Just as I do with my storytelling, people are reeling other people in by using emotion. When I give a workshop, I see a lot of tears, so I know people are starting to get in tune with their spirit. Maybe some of their spirit guides are orca, or maybe they’re gray whale.”

Rosie’s spirit guide is definitely an orca. One of the presentations she does is called “My Life as an Orca.” She lets the spirit of the orca guide her into conversation that reveals the life story of her as an orca, from learning how to catch her first food to how to scratch her tummy. “I never know what’s going to come out of me. It’s different every time.” She smiles. Her love for storytelling is adamant in the joy that spreads across her face. Her passion is sensed and spread to her audience. Listeners get goosebumps as she tells her stories.

Despite having grown up with stories of orcas as spirit guides and amiable to humans, Rosie's first reaction to seeing an orca in the wild was one of mixed emotions. "The orca was going between a reef and an island, probably about two hundred yards off the beach. It was chilling and exciting at the same time. I didn't know whether to laugh from happiness or cry from fear." She glowed at the memory.

She also remembered a time out fishing with her father; he caught a sixty-pound salmon near Deception Pass, toward the mouth of the Skagit River. "My father said, 'Well, the orcas are on their way, because this one is wild.' And sure enough, there came the orcas." She let out a small squeal, reliving the moment.

On another occasion, Rosie was out on the water when she stopped to sing a song for the orcas. The family of orcas known as J-pod showed up with Granny, the matriarch, breaching beside the boat. "They have such sensitive hearing," she shared. "Dad had told me they could hear him sing from one hundred miles away, and that's how I knew it was true." Despite many close encounters, she had never been quite as close to the orcas as her father had been. "I never made eye contact with whales like my father. I can only see through his eyes what that must be like."

All of Rosie's memories of the orcas are sentimental, regarded as "more priceless than gold." They are what fuel her passion for their protection. "Their safety is real important to me. If the whales here went extinct, there would be a lot of grief. Like any other family member, we'd have to hold onto the memories."

She concluded, "Orcas are the other half of my life. They're the other half of my tribe's life. Some people don't look at our relationship to the orcas that way anymore, but I still do because of the stories that I was raised with. My dad was born on Orcas Island. His best friends were orcas. When he traveled from island to island, he had friends along the way. His having had the spirit of orcas to guide him through life has been passed on to me."



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