

A Whale of a Tale: A Story of Reciprocity and Resilience

by Susan Prince

When I was young I read Moby Dick and was both fascinated and horrified by the evil whale that hunted down whalers and could sink their ships. Recently I learned Moby was a sperm whale – a member of one of the most intelligent species of animals in the ocean who communicate with sonar through a very complicated series of clicks. Sperm whales are also known to attack when threatened.

Out in the middle of Laguna San Ignacio—the milky, blue green waters are calm and, as if in a dream—we float, our little boat gently rocking back and forth with the incoming tide. Trance like, I listen for breathing from the grey whales who are now leisurely swimming northward, 100 meters away, on either side of us.

We are still bathing in the ecstasy of our early morning adventure when a pair turns and heads directly toward us. The mother whale nudged her calf up to our boat and we are able to reach out our arms and make contact with them! Faced with a wall of rubbery grey skin, we stroke and scratch the infant. We can even feel the sharp, pointed barnacles specific to these kinds of whales. My heart is racing with the exhilaration of this incredible opportunity! We feel our boat shift as the mother swims underneath us. Emerging on the other side, she lifts her massive head and there is her eye! How incredible to be able to look into that ancient intelligence and to be acknowledged. Our boatman tells us to scratch her jaw and she opens her massive mouth. Inches away from me appear a long row of ivory colored baleen. I rub my fingers along its smooth shiny surface – like piano keys.

Its mid afternoon now and, paying no attention to us, these huge animals are completely absorbed in their watery world. They are doing what they have been doing for millions of years – moving to a timeless rhythm, acting on ancient impulses to migrate, breed, give birth and

nurture their young. Oddly, in this moment, I feel even more connected to them than I did earlier. Could it be because, we too were originally born in the sea?

Whales have lived this way for 50 million years, humans for less than one percent of that span, and it's been just over 70 years since whalers stopped killing them in this Bay. Historically, North Pacific Grey Whales were hunted almost to extinction. They were named Devil Fish because the mother's would attack whaling boats in order to protect their young. Thanks to the establishment of the International Whaling Commission, in 1947 (the year I was born) whaling ceased forever in Laguna San Ignaci

Whales can live up to 70 years or more. This means that some of them may still carry the memory of being hunted. So in 1972, it was an astonishing event that occurred when Pachio Maroyal, a local fisherman, encountered a whale who made friendly contact. At first scared by her proximity, Pachio eventually reached out his hand, amazed to find her match his tentative touch. This encounter happened concurrently with the creation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. And, by 1988, thanks to a collaboration of marine biologists, conservation organizations, the Mexican government and a collaborative of fishermen, the Viczania Biosphere was created.

It is Runolfo Mayoral, Pachico's son, who is our guide on this trip. Having lived and fished on the shores of Baja California his entire life, he is now developing his own ecotourism company. It's very clear how much Runolfo and the rest of his crew appreciate the whales. The boatmen are experts on the habits of these mammals, accurately anticipating when they will emerge from underwater by watching for their subtle fin prints. Turns out that some of the men even have relationships with particular whales and recognize them as they return from year to year.

As I sit in our little panga, floating in a lovely sea of salty rolling waves, I feel at one with this most elemental of phenomena: Ocean. And today, the whales are my visceral connection to it. We see only 2% of

their world as they emerge above water to breathe, and yet, for whales and humans alike, water and air are life! I want to stay here forever, simply being with these most marvelous of creatures who not only exist along side of us but who, amazingly, allow and even invite us to put out our hands and stroke them.

This act of trust and reciprocity touches me so very deeply. I am full of gratitude and humbled to my core.

Susan Prince is a Life Coach specializing in guiding people thru major life transitions. She has created and led several workshops designed for women in their later years and currently co-facilitates the Choosing Conscious Elderhood retreats. Susan has enjoyed the unique opportunity of participating in an indigenous model of community where the Elders have a pivotal role. She has a Teaching Degree and a background in environmental education with an emphasis on nature awareness and has worked with many young people fostering their love and appreciation of the outdoors. Susan has published articles on both eldering and nature connection and, most recently, has written about her experiences in the Amazonian rain forests.

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