

WILD-ANIMAL-TRIGGERED PEAK EXPERIENCES: TRANSPERSONAL ASPECTS

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The experience of transcendent consciousness is said to be within the realm of possibility for nearly everyone (Kokoszka, 1992-1993) and important to the future of humankind as a possible steppingstone to achieving a global shift in human consciousness (Greely & McCready, 1979; Ornstein, 1991; Russell, 1995). Peak experience, which Goswami (1993) described as an experience of the transpersonal self because the persona of the experiencer is not dominant, is the most common means of experiencing transcendent consciousness. Always a spontaneous event, the peak cannot be "commanded" (Rosenblatt & Bartlett, 1976), but it apparently can be facilitated through triggers, of which ten categories have been identified at present (DeMares, 1998; Maslow, 1970; Whittaker, 1998; Walsh, 1990). Defining what constitutes "peak experience" is a matter of some conjecture. For our purposes, we use the term "peak" to describe a complex human experience which is transcendent in nature, beyond normal enthusiasm, and was prompted by close, often eye-to-eye, contact with cetaceans. Considering the highly significant role which animals play in human development (Shepard, 1996; Wilson, 1984) and meaning making (Cooper, 1992), it seems surprising to discover that although *wild* animals have long been recognized to be among the triggers for peak experience (Laski, 1968), the animal-triggered peak has been largely unstudied. The authors recognize the value of previous research on human-animal interactions and are extending that body of literature in the current study by focusing on the wild-animal encounter instead. This paper presents the findings of the first formal phenomenological exploration of the wild-animal-triggered peak (DeMares, 1998) focusing on cetaceans (whales and dolphins). The species represented in the experiences are the Atlantic bottlenose dolphin *Tursiops truncatus*, the orca or killer whale (*Orcinus orca*), and the beluga or white whale *Delphinapterus leucast*. This exploration of the wild-animal-triggered peak encounter arose from the first author's *apriori* observation that cetaceans, particularly dolphins, consistently produce a strong positive emotional reaction in

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many people, a response which correlates with Maslow's (1968) peak experience criteria.

OVERVIEW OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

In the context of the traditional scientific paradigms, the subject of the peak experience is treated empirically, producing data that tends to be of limited use in human-animal studies (Frohoff, 1998; van Manen, 1990; Warren, 1986). The need for a methodology more amenable to the study of the human-animal bond still remains.

It is easy to romanticize encounters with wildlife. But it is not so easy to discount the tremendous emotional and spiritual effects that they sometimes have on people. As a biological scientist, I see that sharing these effects is still frowned upon. Even though most of us know they exist, we are not supposed to acknowledge them, perhaps because our field of study has not learned how to measure them (Frohoff 1998, p. 81).

Phenomenology has the potential to fill this void, bringing an appropriate research method to bear on the personal nature of the human-animal interaction. As a methodology specifically developed for researching lived experience, phenomenology isolates and identifies the essences of experience. Willis Harmon noted, "We do not learn about reality from controlled experiments but rather by identifying with the observed" (Harmon, 1991, p. 53, cited in Moustakas, 1994). The powerful human-animal bond, which lends itself well to the identification technique which Harmon is specifying, is explored through phenomenological reduction in this paper.

An in-depth discussion of the phenomenological methodology is available in Clark Moustakas's classic, *Phenomenological Research Methods*. The procedure applied in this study will be illustrated in step-by-step examples, a flow chart for which is provided in Figure 1. In brief, the procedure entails an intensive process of

Bracketing the research question in order to focus solely on the topic under scrutiny;

Formulating the research question, which is usually asked in a sentence structure similar to "What is the experience of ... ?"

Horizontalizing, which gives every statement by the subject an equal value, as a step towards identifying invariant meaning units;

Clustering the invariant meaning units into themes;

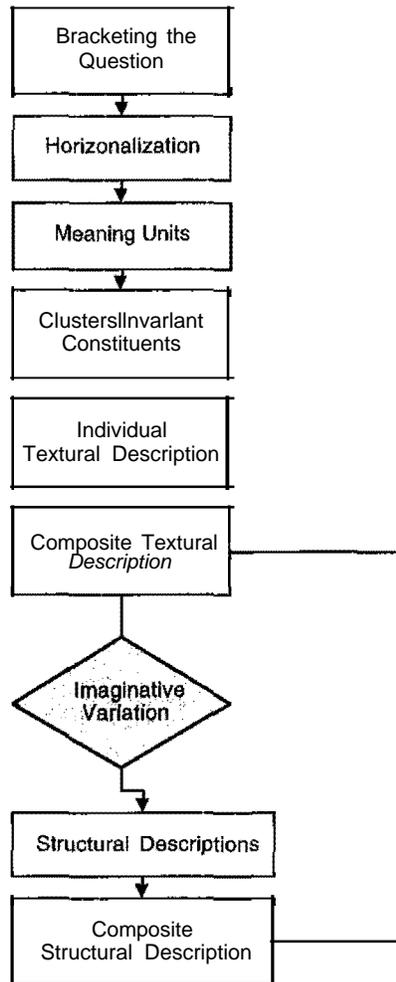
Deriving textural descriptions which articulate the emotionally moving aspects of the research interview at a pre-reflective level;

Building a bridge between textural and structural description through imaginative variation, the process of seeking possible meanings through the utilization of imagination;

Developing structural descriptions which include structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and others; and

Integrating textural and structural descriptions into a collective unified statement, the essences of the experience.

FIGURE I
STEPS IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY



SUBJECTS

The subjects in this study were five females ("Diane," "Denise," "Jennifer," "Karen," and "Judy") ranging in age from 35 to 55, and one male ("Tom") in his late 30s, selected non-randomly (the names have been changed to provide anonymity). The six subjects, which included a married couple (Tom and Karen), were qualified for the study in a pre-screening which determined that each had personally experienced a

highly significant encounter with a whale or dolphin—an encounter which could be said to meet the widely accepted definitions of peak experience (Goswami, 1993; Maslow, 1970; Thorne, 1963).

DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

The interviews took a semi-structured format, and the primary question was open-ended: "Tell me about your most memorable experience with a dolphin or whale." One subject (Judy) told two stories, each involving a different type of cetacean, producing a total of seven separate peak experience interview protocols for analysis.

The task of phenomenological method is to reveal the underlying structure of experience and then to focus on the qualities of the experience, with special attention to "the filling in or completion of the nature and meaning of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Phenomenological reduction enables the researcher to arrive at a description of things as they appear by reducing the experience to themes and horizons. As a process, it consists of a series of steps, as follows:

Bracketing the Question

Bracketing is "the act of suspending one's various beliefs in the reality of the natural world in order to study the essential structures of the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 175). It is accomplished by placing the focus of the research in brackets to enable the setting aside of everything other than the research question so that the entire process "is rooted solely on the topic and question" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

Horizontalization

Horizontalization, or the development of meaning units, is the subjective procedure of giving every statement by the participant an equal value initially, and of breaking the data down into significant, manageable segments. Highlights of the interview with Denise provide an example of this step. Italicized phrases indicate the meaning unit as expressed by the researcher.

Meaning Unit One. "All my life, I had always just loved the Killer Whale. I just wanted to see it. We were just looking for Killer Whales. We didn't know where to go.... And it was almost dark.... And just as we got up there, I saw two fins go like this. So all the next day I was perched out here.... " *The subject had developed an enormous mystique around the Killer Whale. Taking a long-shot, she was rewarded with the sight of that very animal which she was seeking.*

Meaning Unit Two. "I actually looked down the blowhole of one of these guys.... They were going in the kelp.... And it was there that one of them spy-hopped. It was just right there.... " *Denise makes close visual contact with the pods.*

Meaning Unit Three. "I felt at the time [that] he was looking at me. But when he spy-hopped ... looking down and seeing the blowhole was incredible." *The Killer Whale*

seemed to be aware of her presence, even spy-hopping (which is the way whales scope out the out-of-water environs), particularly exciting and dramatic event for the subject,

Meaning Unit Four. "I was able to get down on a rock that was just right level with the water. ... I had been told that these resident pods only took salmon for feed. And I just thought, "Okay, if he takes me, it's okay," It would be an incredible way to go ... one huge male just went right by ... that's when I felt like he really looked at me, He wasn't spy-hopping there, his eyes were just above the water line. . . ." *As her adventure escalates, the subject becomes aware of her own vulnerability, but her excitement overrode her natural fear of this huge, predaceous marine mammal.*

Meaning Unit Five, " . . . I'd wanted this all of my life. I don't know how to describe that feeling. It just seemed too incredible." *The fulfillment of her life's dream, and the feelings of incredulity and excitement which followed, were intensified by the adrenaline surge which she was feeling due to the proximity of the animal and her exposure on the rock.*

Meaning Unit Six, "I felt like I was meant to be there at that moment, for sure:" *The subject experiences a sense of synchronicity or destiny,*

Meaning Unit Seven. "But very excited, Just like the feeling that if they decided to take me for breakfast, it would be okay, that's how strongly I felt about it. . . ." *In the excitement of the moment, the subject loses her objectivity in her desire to experience a sense of oneness with the animal.*

Clusters and Invariant Constituents

All meaning units are reviewed for each subject. Irrelevant, repetitive, and overlapping statements are deleted from the meaning units, producing a series of *horizons*-the invariant constituents and textural meanings of the phenomenon. These invariant meaning units are clustered into themes, selections from which follow. The themes are in italic with descriptions following in the researcher's own words.

Connectedness. Sense of destiny. Feels more connected to self *and* life during the experience. Inner affection and appreciation. Mutual enhancement of emotional state. Possessing family bonds. Inspired by family bonds.

Harmony. Harmony. Pod interconnectedness. Harmonious with environment.

Intention. Proximity. Feelings originated with the cetacean. Cetacean initiated contact. Cetacean intentionally prolongs or repeats the contact.

Reciprocity of Process. Sense of personal connectedness, Synchronicity. Eye contact. Puts on a performance (showmanship). May have positive communication intention, Is responding to human's process, Employs playfulness to make a point. Displays intention toward the human.

Aliveness. Unparalleled experience. Positive feelings beyond all description. High level of excitement. Exclusivity of experience. Amazement. Powerfully impacted. Feelings or physiological efforts evoked at the heart level. Humbled. Respectful.

Experiences deep, satisfying joy. Privileged. Soothed. Total exhilaration. Joy intensified to the point of intolerability. Sense of time is influenced by activity. Experiences encountered as incredible. Sense of completion and fulfillment. Longs to repeat the experience.

Individual Textural Description

The next step was to organize the themes into a coherent textural description, with the objective of articulating the feelings, sense experiences, and thoughts of each subject at an intuitive, pre-reflective level (Moustakas, 1994). The subjective description of the cetacean peak experience summarized the salient points including the emotionally moving aspects of the interview. An example of a textural description ("Jennifer") follows:

My husband and I had been just totally relaxed just walking And something told me to look ... and there was a dolphin I had this most amazing feeling, as though that dolphin had told me to look at him, to make me aware that he was there. And then I had an incredible feeling of total exhilaration that equaled when I had the birth of my children. It was one of those moments that will be with me forever. He was swimming at the same pace that I was walking All that time, my heart was racing. I felt so in tune with that dolphin I felt the dolphin was getting me excited that he was there and making me aware of his presence. . . . He had a message for me ... he wanted me to know this was a place that he was safe and I could actually experience seeing him in his natural habitat. ... He was communicating with me that he knew I was there and I knew he was there.... It was totally enjoyable, the epitome of joy, almost too much.

Composite Textural Description

The next step was to combine all textural descriptions into a single composite textural description. This can be a difficult task, because the challenge is to be faithful to the sense of the experience. The composite textural description follows:

The wild-animal peak encounter brings up powerful feelings of connectedness to another creature. On the part of the animal, there is an anonymity to the experience, demonstrating that the animal as an individual is not what is significant. Rather, what stands out is the overall purpose or message which emerges during the interaction. The enduring qualities of this type of peak experience are a sense of appreciation for the opportunity to share some aspect of the animal's domain or inner state, and the ability to capture the transient state of peak consciousness as part of a treasured memory.

For some, the shared inner state which the animal evokes is the ability to play and have fun; for others, the proximity to and engagement with the animal provides a window onto a world filled with harmony, unity, and grace. Most subjects experienced a powerful sense of connectedness, and even, in one case, an unprecedented experience of unconditional love.

Two of the universal aspects of the experience, *intention* on the part of the animal and *reciprocity of process*, seem to be prerequisites for the experience. The animal is thought to

be purposeful in singling out the human for interaction, often from a crowd of spectators. A mysterious affinity seems to bring the human and the animal together, an interconnection which is sometimes expressed as a destiny of meeting. In the context of that meeting, the human experiences the other universal *themes-harmony, connectedness, and aliveness*. There is a positive response of joy, exhilaration, excitement, and a desire for future encounters with the same species. Emotions evoked in the course of this process tend to become overwhelming.

The humans carry the wild-animal peak encounter forward into their daily lives, recalling it to help dispel stressful situations, tedium, or the discouragement of daily life. As the years pass, they continue to have vivid recall of the event, and equate it with their most satisfying moments. Their wild-animal-triggered peak experience is a story they will be sharing with others for the rest of their lives.

Imaginative Variation

The technique of imaginative variation is employed as a transitional device between the textural description and the next step in the reduction, the structural description. Imaginative variation is the process of seeking possible meaning through a variety of methods. In this study, imaginative variation took two primary forms, the first coming during the interview itself, when subjects were invited to respond to "what if" kinds of follow-up questions about their experiences. The second step in the application of imaginative variation came when the human potentials literature was reviewed for references to the key themes which emerged during the interviews. The imaginative variation for the theme "Reciprocity of Process" follows as a brief example of this exploration:

Although *reciprocity of process* involved a number of elements, the single-most universally present aspect was eye contact, which invariably played a crucial role in the experience. Eye contact is crucial to sensing the inner world of another being. Fox (1992) noted that the most highly evolved animals possess very similar eye reactions, so that the wolf and the human share similar signals with regard to eye contact: a direct stare is a threat. In the context of this study and with these particular cetacean species, however, it had the opposite effect-s-not only did it energize the situation in a positive way, it also had the paradoxical effect of relaxation. Upon reflection, the dynamic of eye contact between human and dolphin may be said to be reminiscent of the East Indian practice of *darshan* (Russell, 1995), in which an experience of higher consciousness is bestowed by an enlightened person either by look, presence, or over distance.

Structural Descriptions

Next, a third-person structural description was derived for each subject:

Judy was experiencing the kind of mother-son conflict that is universal to the human race. She set the stage for a resolution by taking her adult son on a whale-watching outing. She and her son both were willing to let the orcas become a part of their process and accept the example the animals presented. As a result, when they later talked about the old wounds that were troubling her son, they were able to work through their conflicts easily.

Composite Structural Description

All structural descriptions were combined in a composite structural description which specified the key themes which were derived earlier in the process:

The structures that underlie the cetacean-triggered peak experience involve intentional contact initiated by the cetacean regardless of (and sometimes despite) the human's original intention with regard to being present. The human, usually quite suddenly and unexpectedly, finds himself or herself drawn into the encounter.

Communication or the intention of communication is a typical component of the cetacean-triggered peak. For some people, the communication was delivered at the level of the emotions; for others, it took the form of a particular message (*i.e.*, this was a place where the dolphin could be safe) or a desirable outcome (*i.e.*, having fun). When a specific positive message was involved, it was either interpreted as being aimed at the individual human or perceived in a generalized way as the animalian counterpart of an affectionate gesture of acknowledgment.

Getting away from the problems or routine of daily life in an extended vacation or day off is a universal predisposing factor. The sudden appearance of the cetacean is accompanied by the feeling that the animal had arrived specifically to make contact or, in a captive situation, was initiating eye contact.

A sense of disconnection from important elements of life may dominate the psychological mindset of the individual just prior to the peak encounter, with feelings ranging from a sense of not belonging, to desiring a greater continuity in social contacts. The predictable patterns of nature, as evidenced by the periodic return of the animal(s), provide a much-desired sense of continuity and counterbalance for the earlier sense of deficit. If the human is in conflict in areas of personal life, that interaction helps to resolve that conflict and restore harmony. Although harmony, one of the five key themes, emerges in a variety of forms, the subjects related to it most significantly in terms of human relationships. They invariably express a desire to bring the harmony and other positive qualities demonstrated within the animal's social unit into their own worlds and lives. The harmonious pod nature of the cetaceans and their strong familial bonds become emblematic of what is possible within human social units.

For the human, there is a feeling of being permanently changed or enlightened by the experience. Immediate stress reduction is common, as well as the feeling of being able to call forth memories of the encounter at some future date for an emotional boost or to reduce stress.

The cetaceans' interest in, or acknowledgment of, the human presence provided a sense of wonderment, yet there was a tendency towards ultimate denial of the experience. The experience was perhaps too wondrous, and with the passage of time, it comes into a certain amount of question although the original emotions remain vivid and undeniable. For one of the subjects there was a clear element of a movement toward death and rebirth which could be construed as symbolic of a classical spiritual rebirth; for two others, there are parallels drawn with the birth of an infant.

For the human, the peak experience has its own intrinsic value. Passive rather than volitional, receiving rather than demanding, it happens *to* the subject. The animal seems to

be driving the process, and a reciprocal potential benefit of the interaction is perceived to be mutually recognized.

Although the experience involves a wild animal and therefore may take place in an uncontrollable natural setting, the human feels no fear or anxiety. Rather, there is a feeling of fuller personal integration including *discovery* of more spontaneity and expression and, in one case, the expansion of capability -in such areas as the higher emotion of unconditional love. In all cases, the wild-animal-triggered peak encounter touches the human in an emotionally enlivening way. The dynamics of the experience become a cherished life event ranked in the mind of the human participant as among life's *most* memorable experiences,

Synthesis of Meanings and Essences

The final *step*, the synthesis of meanings and essences, merged the fundamental textural and structural descriptions in a unified statement of the essences of the experience as a whole. The synthesis revealed the five key themes named earlier (harmony, connectedness, intention, aliveness, and reciprocity of process), which we propose are characteristic of cetacean-triggered peak experiences and possibly universal to all wild-animal-triggered peaks:

Connecting with another being, and ultimately, being fully connected within oneself, is the underlying desire of the cetacean-triggered peak experience. The feelings that are part of this *process-harmony, aliveness, connectedness, intention, and reciprocity of process* provide the human with validation and a benchmark against which personal growth can be measured.

Harmony. Harmony is manifested outwardly in the animals' relationships to each other and the environment. In humans it is observable as an inner state that is considered optimal and results from the conditions of flow-spontaneous unfolding of being through self-determined actions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Privette, 1983). Yet, although spontaneous, intrinsic harmony represents dynamic order and also provides personal control over subjective experience, often a condition of happiness. Harmony is also manifest in the apparent "pod mind" of the cetaceans, which may allow a kind of oneness in their social experience. In a larger sense, the pod's oneness can be seen as a metaphor for meaning in life, which humans seem to seek constantly.

Connectedness. Connectedness to self, which participants may be seeking, is an oxymoron since the self is an artificial construction. True connection of necessity must be to some greater reality. Within the cetacean pod, it is the collective species-mind, but for humans, that connection must be found through eye contact. The conditions of the "cetacean peak experience" are a reminder that, at least for humans, one finds connection with another being when one sees oneself reflected in the other being's eyes. Connectedness also is *seen* to be derived from a sense of predictability.

Intention. The cetacean seems to be present specifically for the benefit of the human; the animal has a message to share; and the specificity of the encounter to the

human participant is evident to other less involved human witnesses. That the humans would perceive and acknowledge the cetaceans' intention suggests an openness as well as a sense of needing something which the animal might be able to provide. The nature of the message may be general to the human, or specific to the animal (concerning, for example, its well being); in either case, its interpretation is entirely dependent on the human.

Aliveness. Cetaceans imbue the human participant with a sense of aliveness in the process of experiencing awe, elation, deep joy, or unconditional love, all of which are basic to reconnecting with the inner being (Kast, 1991; Wuthnow, 1978; Yeagle et al., 1989). These feelings facilitate a return to wholeness. A pleasurable fear may grip the human—the fear of too much joy or awe. A connection is made with death, in that death would be acceptable in the face of such joy, or parallels may be drawn with the miracle of birth. There is a desire to recapture the experience of aliveness in future cetacean encounters, as well as acknowledgment of the relative infrequency of such experiences.

Reciprocity of Process. Eye contact has a prominent role in the unfolding event and is considered a highly significant aspect of the experience. It is not interpreted as threatening by either cetacean or human; moreover, in the human, it elicits a positive emotional response and creates the bond which is felt with the animal.

Daily life and the people who are part of it, even those who are significant to the individual, must be temporarily set aside in order to open oneself up to the process of becoming sufficiently in the moment to experience the peak. Nor is the exact identity of the cetacean as an individual of importance. What does matter is that human and generic animal have made an intense, significant connection. What is passed in those moments are an aspect of the cetacean's inner state, exemplified in terms of harmony, unity, and grace. To these demonstrations, the human, who finds them missing in his or her life, responds with wonderment and awe.

Never just an emotional experience, the cetacean-triggered peak includes a sense of mission. Whether the human was "destined" to be present for the encounter or was singled out for the experience for reasons known only to the animal, there is a definite communication either of emotion, need, or simply a mutual recognition.

The theme "Reciprocity of Process" has already been discussed. Specific examples and implications of the remaining four themes were elaborated as follows as part of the imaginative variation process:

Harmony

Csikszentmihalyi has noted that an optimal state of inner harmony tends to result when the conditions of flow are present (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; 1993; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Of the six consequences of flow which Csikszentmihalyi lists, one, stress reduction, was a recurrent theme among study subjects.

Diane's experience occurred while she was being stressed from a variety of sources. Most immediately, there had been the stress of escaping from a devastating hurricane. However, work-related events also were creating disharmonies in her life. Looking more closely at *the* causes of *the* internal disharmony she brought to her vacation retreat, her sense of disconnection seemed to be closely related to her feeling of not belonging—a feeling which a pod animal like the dolphin is especially prepared to assuage ("I was thinking about leaving this work; I was thinking about what I was going to do if things were politically different").

Tom was responding to extrinsic harmony, which the pod structure of the cetacean social unit also addresses, when he mentioned the animals' relationships to each other:

· .. their family structure and the way they hang out together All moving in unison just right in front of us. Literally cresting, breathing at the same time, and then going down under. In very close proximity, so you'd see quite a few orca fins all at once as they moved en masse under the water again.

The harmony which Tom observed included the pod as a whole, in terms of the sense of pod mind—acting with a oneness which he admired. But he also saw it demonstrated in a smaller scale in the intensely powerful matrilineal bond that naturally exists between mother orcas and their male offspring:

· .. That definitely appealed.... When we saw them, they were side by side.... And then the way they move so gracefully.

His wife Karen also observed the internal harmony within the pod as well as to their relationship with their environment:

· .. I felt [appreciation for] ... how they seemed in harmony with our environment and in harmony with one another, in contrast to man who is so often in conflict with their environment and in conflict with one another. So that was quite a humbling experience in a sense, and I felt a great deal of respect for them.

Karen also spoke of the orca pod's ability to soothe and relax her:

· .. It was quite soothing, as they swam so gracefully. And they made me feel unstressed.
· .. It made me feel very relaxed.

The orcas remained on Karen's mind when she returned home, another indication of her close identification with them:

· .. I did feel some sense of affinity with them because we had watched them going southwest, north-south, in contrast to people who had just come for five to ten minutes.... we were recognizing some kind of pattern ... we knew they had gone to the north, so to look for them coming from the north.... when we went home I did find myself wondering where they were and what they were doing.

Karen's mention of pattern suggests a search for underlying harmony. She found additional comfort in the growing sense of affinity she was feeling with the orcas,

some of whom were becoming recognizable to her as individuals. In particular, the bonding and sense of loyalty evident in one mother-and-son pair inspired her. At one level, she was being drawn into the formation of an extended pod as an active participant in the circle of harmony generated by the orcas. Her reaction was to feel more harmonious within herself:

... they made me feel very relaxed and deeply moved ... a very deep satisfaction ... deep joy, and humble in some sense, because of this observation that they were in harmony with their environment and each other in contrast to our experiences here.

Judy's experience of harmony was unique among the subjects' experiences because it came at a time of overt disharmony in her relationship with a family member. Selection of the whale-watching outing as the backdrop for their family talk "just seemed like the right thing to do:"

... as we first went out, we encountered ... a mother and an adolescent son named Slick and Mike [who began] breaching in tandem off the bow of the boat. ... And [my son] and I were both in tears, and we felt very much that these whales were responding to our process.

This natural display of harmony was instrumental in bringing the human mother-son pair back into emotional harmony shortly after they got off the boat:

... it certainly made what we were doing a lot easier ... the sharing of the experience of watching them and feeling like the earth itself was supporting us in what we were trying to do ... just opened the door for it.

Connectedness

For Tom, connectedness is first interpreted as something that exists internally within the orca pod-their movement in unison. the way they undulate together as they crest and breathe. This is an example of a level at which connection and harmony are most evident as being almost synonymous. When asked about his sense of personal connection to the orcas, he denied that such a feeling existed, despite their proximity:

... and we were right on the water with them, right on the rocks when several of them came by, for instance that mother-son pair.... I did have this feeling at times that the way they lingered in the area, it was almost as if it was a decision on their part just to put on a bit of a show. But nothing like a personal connection. And the choices of places where they breached. there were some whalewatching boats out in the water. And the orca would breach right next to it. It was almost deliberate.

Whatever the orcas' sense of connection to the humans may have been, Tom reveals the power of his own unarticulated sense of connection to the orcas by telling of a moonlight quest for them that he feels he must conceal from general knowledge because it took place after the park was officially closed for the night:

... one time on that weekend, we went back after the park had closed and we sneaked over the fence ... and went down to the water's edge just because we thought we'd like to see if

they were around again. And true enough, they came by. . . . We could just hear the breathing as they'd come up, and occasionally hear the sort of smack as one of them would maybe do some sort of percussive thing, either whacking its fin or jumping out of the water. And then we could just vaguely see them in the moonlight

One of the interesting parallels between the humans and the orcas is that both are highly social creatures. Social bonds are also keenly desired by humans in order to be assured of comfort, support, security, and warmth, and to avoid feeling alone in life.

As Karen observed, the vast majority of the people who come to the park pass through quickly, although there is nothing to keep them from staying longer or returning at various times throughout their island visit to sit for hours on the rocks as Tom and Karen do. Karen's words remind *us* of the fact that one does not find connection with any being until one sees oneself reflected in the other's eyes, and that cannot transpire when people are like the proverbial ships passing in the night. Yet the orcas, as something magnificent and independent and mysterious, are intuitively understood to carry the potential for achieving and sustaining a much deeper connection, despite the couple's lack of inclination to acknowledge these highly intelligent animals as beings who are fully cognizant of the watching humans, possibly even to the point of recognizing them as individuals.

Intention

One of the most dramatic examples of animal intention, because of the mystery of how the encounter occurred, is Diane's story. Her encounter occurred in waters where the local people had not seen ~~any~~dolphins in seventeen years:

... That's the part that amazes me. It's like, then I show up, why is this dolphin here? Right here, smack in front of my tiki hut. Not ten yards down, I mean, I'm lying in my hammock, exhausted ... and I'm looking out, and there's this dolphin. And it comes every single day, at the same time.

The first time she saw the dolphin, she excitedly jumped in the water and swam around, hearing but not seeing the animal. That pattern was repeated for an entire week, as the dolphin came closer and closer to her until

The last couple of days he actually allowed me to see him. And the last day, he jumped and whistled and twirled and got maybe a large man's arm's length away from me. And it was just incredible And this was just too amazing, this was too special. This was really an amazing experience. I still think of it as being one of the most special dolphin experiences I've ever had.

Despite the protestations of her rational mind, Diane couldn't help projecting that the dolphin

... came there for me, this dolphin knew that this dolphin knew that I ... just needed to have some fun. And he came to check me out, And [he came] every single day, at the same time: "Here I am! Came for you again, Diane. Come swim with me:" And then we'd swim about twenty minutes and he'd be gone.

Almost as extraordinary, others who witnessed this unusual sequence of events didn't try to take personal advantage of it—they, too, recognized that the dolphin's intention was directed toward Diane:

... the people from the town would come and look every morning and say, "This is amazing, we've never seen this before. Never seen a dolphin. Seventeen years. This is amazing." ... and I said, "Come on, come get in the water with me." And they said, "No. This dolphin's here for you."

Judy also was struggling with her logical mind:

... it could be a stretch as to the fact that these two whales were actually responding to what [my son] and I were doing. But [my son and I] both felt very strongly that was what was happening.

Jennifer believed her attention was drawn to the animal by a volitional communication:

... I had this ... most amazing feeling ... as though that dolphin had told me to look at him, to make me aware that he was there.

She sensed the message may have concerned the animal's well-being:

... that dolphin ... wanted me to know that he was there and that this was a place that he was safe and ... living in his natural habitat.

Only the married couple almost completely dismissed the intention of the orcas. **In** this regard, Torn and, to a lesser extent, Karen, came close to being what Maslow (1970) termed "non-peakers." Such people, Maslow concluded, are engaged in a way of life which forces them to be extremely or completely rational or "materialistic" or mechanistic. Or they may be either extremely means-oriented people (for whom peak experiences have no practical outcome) or extremely other-directed people—those who are quite out of touch with themselves. Transcendent experiences may be regarded by such people as a form of disturbance or a complete loss of control in the face of irrational emotions. Thus, the person may be afraid of peaks, and so suppresses them, denies them, "forgets" them, or otherwise turns away from them.

Aliveness

Elements of *awe*, *elation*, *deep joy*, and *unconditional love* were universal to all subjects in this study. We have grouped these components of non-duality/wholeness under the term *aliveness*, after Maslow's Being Value of *aliveness* (Maslow, 1971). In earlier writings, Maslow (1968) had observed that peak experiences are typically characterized by wonder, awe, and surrender before the experience as before something great, sometimes with a touch of pleasant fear of being overwhelmed. This is typically evidenced in words similar to "This is too much for me," "It is more than I can bear," or "It is too wonderful" (Maslow, 1968). He further observed, "... many writers on the various peak experiences have made the connection with the experience of dying, that is, an *eager dying*." A typical phrase might be: "*This is too wonderful*."

I don't know how I can bear it. I could die now and it would be all right" (Maslow, 1968). This particular choice of words is strikingly similar to the exclamation of one of the subjects, Denise, who said, "... if [the orca] takes me, it's okay. It would be an incredible way to go."

The theme of death and rebirth is common to all mythological traditions and most personal religious experiences (Halifax, 1979). In this study, a wonderment tended to emerge during the cetacean-facilitated peak that for some study subjects led to parallels with the miracle of birth. Jennifer equated her dolphin encounter with the peakjoy experienced at the birth of her child ("And I started to feel that feeling of total exhilaration. It was the most incredible feeling. It equals when I had the birth of my children"), and Karen, who was not yet a mother, said, "And I do think it's something I will really remember until the day I die, and could never be matched by any other experience in life, actually. Other experiences could be extremely satisfying, like the birth of a child or whatever, those experiences would be in other categories."

Judy's experience may have been the most profound of all, touching as it did on unconditional love:

And it didn't take but a couple of seconds before I started to have a feeling that I've never had before at this level. It was love, exponentially enhanced to a point that I can't describe. . . .Ijust stood there and realized that tears were falling off my chin.... My blouse was wet. ... The feelings [about connecting and love] were so powerful and so filling.. ."

In her comments, Judy reveals her view that when unconditional love is glimpsed, it is to be viewed as *closely* related to *the* accomplishment of connectedness. At the same time, she acknowledges a very important aspect of that love energy-its non-specificity.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploration of the parameters of cetacean-triggered peak experience is believed to be the first study which investigates the ennobling and transformative effect which an encounter with a wild animal can have on a human. The human-cetacean peak experience has been found to incorporate the elements of the classic peak experience as defined by Maslow and others, demonstrating that cetaceans are one of the trigger species for peak experience, and illuminating the nature of the wild-animal triggered peak. Our study suggests that a significant experience with a dolphin or whale can arouse in the human participant a sense of harmony, connectedness, and aliveness. The subjects who experienced such an animal-triggered peak also perceived deliberate intention and direct eye contact with the animals.

It is not presently known whether any order or species of wild animal other than the order *Cetacea* (whales and dolphins) has the capability to consistently trigger the peak experience, and if they do, what themes would characterize encounters with other trigger species. Speaking informally with one person who reported having had a peak experience involving a moose, the first author identified the presence of the five key themes which emerged in this study in the course of formal phenomenological

reduction-harmony, connectedness, reciprocity of process, aliveness, and intention. Further research is needed to determine the range of wild species which may be implicated in the animal-triggered peak, and what patterns are present including the universality or species-specificity of key themes.

Although Maslow did not address the wild-animal-triggered peak in his research, he did make reference to *man being in the world of nature*, meaning that humankind must be

at least minimally isomorphic with nature (similar to it) in order to be viable in it. ... Perhaps this thrilling to nature (perceiving it as true, good, beautiful, etc.) will one day be understood as it kind of self-recognition, a way of being at home, a kind of biological authenticity, of "biological mysticism," etc.... (Maslow, 1970, pp. 321-22).

As is demonstrated in this paper, when a strong natural affinity is found to exist between species, such as has been shown in this study to be achievable between humans and certain species of cetaceans, we may rediscover an important previously lost or undeveloped part of ourselves, consistent with Maslow's observation above. In fact, by providing a bridge to the elevated states of consciousness which humankind has always sought, cetaceans and certain other species may epitomize the highest value of animals.

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