Eyes of the Wild

Journeys of Transformation with the Animal Powers

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The Book of Whale

The Turning Whale

Whale. From the Old English Hval or wheel

1 The Opening

Among Gray Whales, Laguna San Ignacio Baja California Sur, Mexico

The gray whales come to us.
"*Tenemos amigos*," the boat driver Cuco Fisher says. "We have friends."
He cuts the outboard engine as the two whales swim towards our small open boat, their smoothly powerful undulations rising and falling through the lagoon's clear green water: a gray whale mother with her young calf by her side.

The whales surface alongside, an eruption of life from the deep, the water rippling in shining falls from their backs as the mother exhales, a gust of warm spray that briefly hangs in a mist plume on the air. The calf lifts its head above the water and I glimpse the ancient, undersea face – the dimples on the dark skin of the upper jaw, each one with a single bristle of short hair; the long mouth with gently rounded lips, the top lip slightly overlapping. Then the calf sinks onto the strong support of the mother's back and the pair submerges, becoming little more than vague suggestions of enormous presence until they disappear into the green depths.

In the silence they leave behind, I wait, gazing into the water in the hope they will surface again.

Slowly, surely, with silken gliding, the mother returns to the surface. There is no stir, no ripple through the water as she rises, only the massive darkening of her body, coming more clearly into focus until she breaks through the surface beside me, and her blowholes pulse again with that same great *whoosh* of exhaled air.

The plosive power of the whale mother's breathing resounds with the expansive dimensions of her life. Her body extends forty feet or more beneath the water – twice the length of our open boat. The double curve of her tail flukes spreads around twelve feet wide. She weighs perhaps thirty tons, and the mottled white patches on her dark-gray skin, the absence of a dorsal fin, and the colonies of barnacles that cluster roughly on her back and sides distinguish her as one of the gray whales of the Eastern Pacific, also known as the California Gray, *Eschrichtius robustus*.

Each year the gray whales make one of the longest and most arduous journeys of any creature on Earth as they swim between their principal summer feeding grounds in the Bering Strait and the southern Chukchi Sea and the sheltered lagoons along the Pacific coast of Baja California where they mate and give birth between January and April. San Ignacio is the only one of the lagoons that has not been affected by development. It is set within the Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site and the largest nature reserve in Mexico.

When this gray whale mother knew she was pregnant, she left Baja California and turned north, swimming an average of eighty miles each day and following the entire Pacific coast of North America within a few miles of shore until she reached the Bering Sea and Strait. Although she may have foraged along the way, the richly productive Arctic waters are where she was able to feed most intensively. In late autumn she began her journey south, to bring her calf safely to birth inside the lagoon's mangrove channels, where the sheltered waters helped her raise it to the surface for its first breath.

After twelve months curled inside its mother's womb, the newborn whale calf's first movements in the water are wobbly and uncertain. The mother rolls onto her back to hold her baby against her chest and strokes it gently with her flippers. When the calf has grown stronger on the extraordinary richness of her milk – gray whale milk is more than 50% fat and contains three times as much protein as human milk – she leads it to more challenging waters near the lagoon exit, to swim through the powerful currents and develop the stamina and coordination it will need to follow her north.

In the past year alone, this whale mother has swum perhaps 10,000 miles or more while carrying her calf within her body. She will feed it, teach it, love and protect it with unstinting, implacable devotion as they make their epic journey north together. By the time they both arrive in the Bering Strait, the mother will have been largely fasting for eight months and she may have lost a third of her body weight.

With the mother alongside, the whale calf raises its head above the surface – as curious, playful and eager for attention as any young mammal – and I splash it on the nose with handfuls of water, a sensation which it clearly enjoys.

Then the mother does something utterly extraordinary. She sinks beneath her calf and deliberately brings it closer to the surface by supporting it on her back, so that I can touch it easily on the head and nose. As I run my hands along the calf's lips, the mouth opens with an audible release of suction and my fingers brush the baleen fibers that line the upper jaw in place of teeth among the grays and all other baleen whales.

No wild creature can make a greater gesture of trust than to bring you her newborn and allow you to touch it. This mother is bringing me what is most precious to her, the calf she has carried for twelve months in her body and brought to birth a few weeks ago in this lagoon. The next time she surfaces, she lingers alongside and I begin speaking aloud to her, naturally and without thinking. I tell her how beautiful she is, how happy I am to meet her. She blows again, a short misty burst like a snort, and submerges. A moment later the wooden *panga* is rattled by the power of her forceful underwater exhalation. It

rises out of the water, rocks and settles back, and I realize with shock that she has just lifted us up on her back and placed us gently down again.

Mother and calf flow over and under and around each other; they circle the boat in long graceful turns, sink and rise again with the water sparkling on their wet sides like stars. At times the mother turns through the water in a slow, powerful rotation that takes her from her belly to her back. Again, the boat rocks as she pushes it with her head from below. Yet I never have a moment's fear of her great size and power. She moves with completely refined, sensitive awareness through the whole of her body.

When the mother surfaces next, she comes close enough for me to reach out and touch her. I run my hands along the skin of her side, which feels indescribably smooth, as though the texture has been endlessly refined by the washing of the sea. Her flesh is firm and cool beneath my hands. Through the physical contact with her body, a sense of the expansive dimensions of her being opens inside me like soundings from some vast interior sea. As the depth of the meeting grows, it becomes an opening through which something entirely new keeps pouring – a wordless sense of connection with a greater life.

Turning onto one side, the whale gazes up at me through the water; looking down into her dark eye, ringed with folds of skin, I meet the lucid and tranquil gaze of an ancestor, one of the ancient ones of the Earth.

I feel her taking me out, far out, of thought and linear time, beyond the limited concerns of my ordinary mind, into a profound sense of meeting with another being, whose consciousness is not separate from my own.

When she surfaces next with her calf by her side, the whale mother places her nose directly against the side of the *panga* and becomes completely still. Her blowholes are closed; her immense power is utterly composed and quiet. I reach out and touch her on the head with my right hand, then I put my left hand on her calf and join with them both on the undivided sea.

That evening, back at our camp on the lagoon shore, I try to write down something of the power of what I have experienced with the whale mother and her calf. But all that comes to me are a few terse words: *what was, on the day of creation, is, now.*

Eden, I think, is not simply a mythical place, or a metaphor for original innocence, or an outworn and divisive religious symbol. Eden is a state of being, and we are free to return every time we know ourselves again in deep communion with the rest of life.

The gray whales began to seek out this communion with people in 1972. A Mexican fisherman, Francisco "Pachico" Mayoral, one of the small number of permanent residents of San Ignacio Lagoon, was fishing near Punta Piedra, the rocky point at the lagoon's mouth where it begins to open to the Pacific Ocean, when a gray whale surfaced alongside him and lingered by his *panga*. Like the other fishermen who moved between the whales in the small open *pangas*, he had always been careful to avoid coming near them. But this whale did not submerge again; it remained alongside for almost an hour, until, moved in some mysterious way, Francisco Mayoral reached out his hand and stroked its side.

Even his own family could not believe him at first when he told them about the encounter. The gray whales' reputation for dangerous aggression was simply too well founded.

Among nineteenth-century whalers, the California grays were considered to be the most deadly target of all. The whalers called them "devil fish" and they claimed that the gray whales had caused more deaths and injuries than all other hunted whales put together. Their pursuit began in the late 1850s when the American whaling captain, William Scammon, first located the birthing lagoons on the Baja California coast and managed to navigate the difficult entry through the shallow channels between the sandbars.

Once inside the lagoons, the whalers drove their small boats between the mothers and calves, separating them and bringing the frantic mothers close enough to harpoon. The whale mothers were fierce defenders of their young. While their strength lasted, they used their heads to batter and overturn the whaling boats. They lashed them with their tail flukes, broke the rudders and flung the men into the water. Scammon later wrote that these gray whale mothers "showed a power of resistance and tenacity of life that distinguishes them from all other cetaceans. Many an expert whale man has suffered in his encounters with them, and many a one has paid the penalty with his life."

From the beginning the commercial hunt for the gray whale followed the same bloody and destructive course it has done for every whale species – hunt the whales to the very edge of extinction, extract maximum profit from them until too few remain to make it economically worthwhile, then move on to another whale species and do exactly the same to them. Season after season, the unrelenting carnage continued inside the Baja lagoons until their waters lay almost empty between arid shorelines stacked with bones. Scammon, who was both the instigator and the clear-eyed and factual witness of the slaughter, wrote in 1874:

The large bays and lagoons where these animals once congregated, brought forth and nurtured their young, are already nearly deserted. The mammoth bones of the California gray lie bleaching on the shores of these silvery waters, and are scattered among the broken coasts from Siberia to the Gulf of California; and ere long it may be questioned whether this mammal may not be numbered among the extinct species of the Pacific.

The pursuit of gray whales inside their birthing lagoons was no longer worth the effort. Slowly, the whales began to recover – only to meet the force of more powerful industrial whale catchers armed with exploding grenade harpoons at the beginning of the twentieth century. When they finally received formal protection in the early 1930s, the California gray whales had become so rare that they were rarely seen at sea and it seemed possible that they would follow their gray whale cousins in the North Atlantic to complete extinction – the first and, so far, the only whale population to have been completely extinguished by commercial whaling by the mid-1700s. The world's industrial whaling fleets turned to the pursuit of more profitable targets, particularly the blue whales in the southern ocean, which they slaughtered in hundreds of thousands between the 1930s and 1960s. The scale of that slaughter was matched by its extreme cruelty. One whaling captain wrote of the blue whale in 1962:

"*How few people realize the despairing fight it puts up before dying of convulsions with an explosive shrapnel grenade tearing at its vitals. It has to be seen to be believed.*"

Left alone at last, the shattered California grays began their long recovery to their current population, which is estimated at between seventeen and twenty thousand. Until the last few years, researchers believed this level roughly corresponded to their population before commercial exploitation. More recent research reveals that it is probably well below it: a study of genetic variation between individuals that was carried out in 2007 suggests that before commercial whaling there were four to five times as many gray whales in the oceans.

Walking along the white desert flats crusted with black algae, I find whalebones scattered on the shore – massive shoulder blades, vertebrae and hooped ribs. Exposure to the salt and bright sunshine, the wind and rain has worn and bleached the bones and they feel smooth and warm to the touch, as though they have taken on some of the heat of sunlight as they aged. I do not know how long they have lain here, but it is entirely possible that they once belonged to some of the whales that were slaughtered inside San Ignacio Lagoon.

For more than a week I have spent every day on the water among the gray whales. Every day the whales have approached with the same gentle playfulness and peace. Although I am never again alone in the boat with them, as I was with the mother and calf, I can see how consciously the whales choose their level of interaction. The boats are not allowed to follow the whales. The grays themselves choose when to approach, and how long to remain alongside. I have seen some whales return to the same boat until they have connected with every single person on board. I have returned to Eden. I do not want to leave.

In recent years, some of the researchers who study cetaceans – all whales and dolphins – have begun to look at them in a much larger way. They have discovered that individual whales and dolphins have a sense of personal identity and consider the needs of others. They have the ability to use abstract concepts and communicate them to the others in their close-knit social groups. They are intensely cultural – passing information, understanding

and ideas between clans and individuals in ways that are still mysteries to science. As their scientific research erodes the artificial boundaries between humans and cetaceans, some leading specialists now argue that cetaceans should be granted basic rights as persons, which would mean that no whale or dolphin would ever be captured, slaughtered or confined.

The grays themselves use a wide variety of sounds to communicate and they can live to be seventy years old. It is entirely possible that the whales that came to this lagoon in the 1970s, when the first whale approached Francisco Mayoral, had experienced the carnage of industrial whaling, which almost wiped them completely from the Earth.

What could possibly motivate the grays to reach out to people in this way? How can they be so open and so trusting? How can they come to us in such peace, as though they had never known that welter of blood, anguish and death, and allow us to play with their young in the very same places where they suffered and died? These questions touch me all the more deeply because I have been with the gray whales before, at the northern end of their great annual migration. On that journey through their feeding grounds in the Bering Strait I saw the whales struck by hand-held harpoons and lances. I saw the waters of the Bering Strait run red with spurted blood from their blowholes and I saw them die.

There are scientists who offer pragmatic explanations for the whales' extraordinary openness towards people. They speculate that friendly whales may be attracted by the sound of the outboard engines on the *pangas*, which vibrate in a similar register to their own underwater calls. Or that new mothers are looking for a way to keep their lively babies entertained and take a little time off from the demands of motherhood. For others the whales' attitude and behavior have a profound spiritual dimension: they reach out in a gesture of forgiveness for the suffering and death they have known at human hands.

But forgiveness is a word that is loaded with the legacy of human pain, with all our emotional struggles and distress. Like anybody who has ever struggled to find forgiveness and let go of the corrosive effects of bitterness and anger, I know how these feelings linger, how they surface again after the years in which they seemed to lie forgotten. We humans hold fast to the shadows of the past; we do not find it easy to forgive.

What I have experienced among the gray whales is quite different. The whales have shared with me something of that ineffable freedom which lies *beyond* the difficult human struggle to forgive the past – to truly forgive both ourselves and others and find release from the repetitive cycles of pain and suffering. The whales approach us from the other side of the human duality of guilt and forgiveness, reaching out to share that freedom with us – troubled, uneasy sleepers being nudged awake by some benign, enormous friend. They are awake and present on this Earth where so many of us have gone to sleep, and lost ourselves in separate dark dreams of emptiness and fear.

In the gray whales' company I have come to realize that we do not know what the whale really is. The usual categories of understanding, based on the separation between human consciousness and the consciousness of the whale, are made meaningless by the power of

their presence – life meeting life, consciousness meeting consciousness, in recognition and in peace.

The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka, the Great Spirit, and this center is really everywhere, it is within each one of us. Black Elk, holy man of the Lakota people.

This book begins and ends among the gray whales, moving through a circle, which is perhaps the most ancient of all symbols for unity. The four animals – Whale, Wolf, Bear and Horse – hold the four divisions or directions, an image for the unity of diversity that is common to the shamanic, Native American, Celtic Christian and many other traditions.

At the center of the circle, at the heart of the six directions – the four cardinal directions with the Heavens and the Earth – is the point that represents the spiritual heart within each one of us, where forgiveness and renewal well up freely from the depths of who we really are. Whale, Wolf, Bear and Horse are companions, guides and helpers on the journey towards the center, as the animals were in many wisdom traditions, before the ego-driven mind stripped all sense of sacredness from the Earth and reduced life to mere commodity, whose only worth resides in gain.

I traveled with these animals through places of great elemental power – the Russian *taiga* forest, the shores of the Caspian Sea, the Northern Rockies, the Siberian coast of the Bering Strait and the edges of the Arctic pack ice. The journeys gave me intense appreciation for the animals themselves, each one a marvel of living beauty and intelligence. They also brought me into contact with some of the most remarkable people I have ever known, men and women who have lived close to these animals in the wild, and come to known them intimately. Several are highly experienced field biologists; the others are sensitive and perceptive observers of the natural world. They all shared their deep knowledge of animal behavior and ecology with me. In addition, each one told me an extraordinary story of finding direct connection with the animals they studied in ways that profoundly affected them, and took them beyond the conventional boundaries between species.

There were many times when these journeys also affected me very deeply. I found that the power of the landscape, the presence of the animals and the dynamic flow of living energy through the wild were working on me inwardly. They were calling back aspects of my own being that I had long neglected or forgotten and driving me to explore the inner realities in ways I had not dared to do before. And this was drawing me into the deep current that has run through many human cultures for tens of thousands of years – the natural connection between the animals, the rhythms and cycles of the Earth and the waking of the soul within each person.

The idea that finding inner relationship with the animals and the elemental life of nature can help us to open up the deeper levels of awareness that usually remain dormant in everyday life, has become foreign in the West. Our culture has conditioned us to remain caught up in mental activity and the processes of analysis and judgment. But it is a fundamental aspect of many indigenous wisdom traditions, as well the original Christian teachings. The shamans of Siberia and the High Arctic, the spiritual elders of Native North America and the storytellers of the Pagan and Celtic Christian traditions of Britain and Ireland whose teachings appear in this book, were natural mystics who made no separation between the life of the Earth and cosmos and the spiritual light within the human heart. They lived among the animals; they observed their ways with great care and attention, like any field biologist. But their love and knowledge of the animals had another dimension: they understood them to have their own connection to the realities beyond physical appearance. To be present with the animals, beyond the limitations of the ordinary thinking mind, opened the way to these subtle realities and helped people to live in balance on the Earth.

The inner connection with the animals often found expression through storytelling, for stories convey patterns of meaning in ways that bypass the thinking mind and speak directly to the imagination and the heart. Throughout this book, you will find retellings of some of these traditional stories. I hesitated before including them: I did not want to simply appropriate them or use them disrespectfully. But the stories spoke so powerfully to me of what is constant in human experience, and the potential for authentic inner transformation, that I felt they wanted to live again in people's minds, in association with the magnificent creatures that originally helped to inspire them.

Although we inhabit a different reality, the essence of what the shamans and spiritual elders knew and taught remains true, and it can help us now. All the world's great mystical teachings are one in their simplicity. They tell us that the essence within all life is also the deepest reality within each one of us, at the very center. When we lose the direct connection with our own true nature, we drift into a mind-made world and become prey to all the fantasies of fear, vulnerability and greed. But the life of the Earth is far beyond the separate, egocentric mind and it can help us to wake up again, and live from the greater consciousness at the core, the true Self within the Divine, which is untouched by fear, need, and separation.

Throughout this book, I explore the way in which the animals and the life of the wild can help us *now* to make that awakening, which has never been more urgently needed. This is a journey into deeper connection with the life of the Earth, not away from it.

And so in my mind I go back now, to those first encounters with the gray whales, as I travelled through the coastal waters of the Bering Strait, in a small open boat, with my dear friend Afanassi Makovnev as my guide, on the journey that marked the turning of my own life, the point where it began to change.

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