

Can we now finally wake up and see that we are not alone?

(The grief of lost babies in captivity and in freedom)

We all know that the bond between a large brained mammal mother and her child is one of the strongest ones there is. The recent news of a southern resident killer whale in The Pacific North West, Tahlequah also known as J35, and her dead calf has shown how a whale mourns a lost loved one. In my opinion, she has also shown us how destructive the captivity industry is to small cetaceans. A dolphin in captivity is forced to mourn her young far more frequently than in the wild. A life in captivity for a particular bottlenose dolphin called Veera is just one among countless heart-breaking stories.

Veera lost her first calf in a Finnish facility in 1990. According to Janet Mann (a professor of Biology and Psychology at Georgetown University, Washington DC), female bottlenose dolphins begin to calve around age 11 or 12. In 1990 Veera was only six or seven years of age. Her calf died on the same day. This young, first time mother lost her calf and was without the support, guidance and love of her own family pod, left to mourn her dead calf confined with four unrelated dolphins in a concrete tank. According to newspaper reports, staff at the facility threw a rubber boot into the tank for Veera to 'nurse'. Veera was clearly mourning, but despite this was given no time to 'grieve', being made to perform a couple of days later. She came to be known as the most aggressive, 'difficult to manage' dolphin in Särkänniemi Dolphinarium, which has now closed.

The last time I saw Veera in captivity was in 2011. By then she had lost at least four calves; however, these births and mortalities were not made public knowledge. Like so many other captive dolphins, I observed her circling the tiny tank, always anti-clockwise, always surfacing to breathe at the same spot, again and again. The staff informed the audience in a very light-hearted manner that Veera was 'very stubborn' and that they 'never force the animals to perform during a show, if that is not what they choose to do'.

After 34 years of captivity, Veera has not only lost her freedom and ability to act as a dolphin would in the wild, she also appears to be showing signs of mental torture. Veera is now approximately 40 years of age, currently housed at Attika Zoo in Greece, where she is kept on birth control drugs, as she is the only female in the tank with six males, one of whom is her only surviving calf, a male named Eevertti, born in 1996. Apparently surplus to requirements, Attika Zoo wanted to relocate Veera to another dolphinarium, but no one wanted her. She is severely damaged mentally, too old to breed and will not perform to an audience. I strongly believe that the main causes for her mental state are the years of confinement in captivity and the loss of her numerous calves, constantly being denied time to grieve. We already know so much how whales live and now we are beginning to learn how they die. The story of Tahlequah and her lost baby should be added to a long list of already existing reasons why dolphins and whales should not be taken from the wild for profit, in the name of 'entertainment'.

The calf, born into an endangered orca population, survived only half an hour after birth. For 17 days, Tahlequah was observed carrying her dead baby, obviously mourning the loss of her calf. Tahlequah's behavior was not unusual. Orcas, dolphins and other mammals, including gorillas, are known to carry their deceased young. Elephants come back to visit the bones of their family members, and have been seen gently stroking them in silence. To my knowledge, the southern resident killer whale population in the Pacific Northwest, USA, is the most well-studied wild population of orcas on the planet; however, it appears to have taken the death of a female calf to raise sufficient media attention and highlight the issues threatening not only this pod but the entire southern resident population for a global audience.

It has been said that the duration of Tahlequah's grief has never been observed before. Do all cetaceans mourn in this way? We do not know whether they do; however, should we not give them the benefit of the doubt? Death is part of the circle of life for all living things. When love is included in that life and it suddenly disappears with the loss of a loved one, it turns into grief. We humans mourn our dead in many different ways according to our cultures and beliefs. I believe dolphins and whales are fully aware of their own heritage and history. Tahlequah was apparently mourning the way cetaceans mourn. Surely we should accept that, with our large brains, we are not alone in feeling or wanting to display grief.

What makes it heart-breaking for us humans is that there are so many human-induced "what ifs"; what if the captivity industry had not decimated this orca population decades ago? What if this population never experienced the lifelong trauma of missing pod members, including calves? In the case of Tahlequah, these are the points it is vital we study and focus on, before it is too late for the J Pod and the rest of the southern resident killer whale population.

As for the captive dolphin and whale population today, we are sadly only too aware of the level and amount of suffering they endure in concrete tanks. The tiny concrete tank in Attika Zoo is, to all intents and purposes, nothing but a badly run, chlorinated hospice for unwanted dolphins for whom freedom from a captivity situation cannot come soon enough. I often wonder if, for a dolphin like Veera, placement in a seaside sanctuary could perhaps ease her mental state, with the natural sounds and contours of the ocean, as I fully believe she remembers them. It must be our duty to give individuals like Veera a chance to reclaim what has been denied them in a life of captivity.

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August 2018