

I AM THE WALRUS

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"The Universe makes rather an indifferent parent, I'm afraid,"

Mr Jarndyce - Charles Dickens "Bleak House"



I am the walrus, class of Mammalia, order of Carnivora, family of Odobenidae – Latin for “those that walk with teeth”, full name *Odobenus Rosmarus Divergens* or Pacific walrus for short.

I am a mammal, and I come from the Pacific North East, or Alaska to be precise. By mammal I mean my wife Chukchi fed our son, lolling about at the edge of an ice floe like a human standing at the bar. Our son hung upside down, suckling on and off for the next two years until, his teething complete he decided to emulate me and forage for his food like any normal walrus.

That's becoming harder to do – the sea is warmer and the ice less frequent. I myself have seen walrus calves, abandoned before they have learned to get their own food. They cry for their mothers. But what can I do, a mere male, while the mothers have gone north with the retreating ice to save their own skins. They will starve and die.

And all walruses will be the poorer. Never think to know for whom the floes melt – they melt for you, not us. But we're the ones who pay the price. But I am getting ahead of myself. I'll tell that to you face to face.

The people have come to hear me, amongst others – men and women, although the men were the ones I really wanted to speak to. I was there with the other animals that have been endangered by the people's behaviours. All beings on earth – amoebas too probably. And the children of the people were there too, as observers. The gathering is to be held in a large amphitheatre carved out of the solid granite, and polished by the actions of nature over the years. It has a large flat floor, big enough for this Noah's Ark gathering, and pools of fresh and seawater for the comfort of the marine denizens. As for the people, well they can bring their blankets, their Goretex, their Icebreaker clothing to keep warm.

How the council happened is immaterial. It wasn't imagined as a trial, or tribunal. The other half just wanted humans – and their children – to hear what they were doing to us, and themselves. There was a time when I could swim with the ice floes, hook myself onto one with my tusks and have a rest, even go to sleep, safe in the knowledge that I wouldn't slip off and sink. Now the floes are few and far between. The warming has started. I hear that Greenland is slipping away. Someone once told me that on the other side of the world, is another icy place, founded on rock. And that too is melting, and in danger of sliding off into the sea.

I suppose it started when people from outside our area came to hunt us. The Inuit were one thing – we had developed a symbiosis, not really equal because we hardly

ever killed them. But we recognised how hard it must be for a mammal with no fur, no blubber and children who took an inordinate time to grow up, to exist in our environment. And they couldn't trawl the sea bottom for shellfish the way we could. Couldn't really even swim, unless I happened to upset their kayaks. No excuse really but we felt sorry for them. Anyway they weren't our natural enemy. The polar bear and the orca – or killer whale – fill that role. But again, an eye for an eye and a tooth (my tooth) for their tooth. Who do you think won? Me, whenever I've had to fight, which was often enough.

People think of me as a ponderous creature. I weigh 1000 kilograms – over a ton. Even so I can run on land, and almost dance. But in the water I'm a star. Graceful, acrobatic, twisting and turning, staying underwater for half an hour or more.

I'm told some human males even try to emulate our look, the bristly muzzle, with their own moustaches. But not the tusks – they can't aspire to them. Even we are the only creatures that live in the sea with tusks like ours – and mine will be almost a metre long in a few more years.

Well it's time to meet up with them at last and tell them some home truths. A council of all beings. Well, not quite, but enough to have a quorum and be democratic. The cavern is huge, but I can hear every word, whimper and roar from the animals, their spirits and the other creatures gathered here at this council. The humans are last to arrive, a small group of about a hundred. The women and children are separate from the men – perhaps they know who is going to get a telling off, or a growling.

The African elephant is going to chair the meeting, as the largest of all land mammals. One by one he asks animals, including the spirits of those long extinct to tell their stories. More than a hundred birds, and almost as many animals have died out in the last 400 years. What tales can they tell us? This was to be different from the gatherings held by concerned humans because the animals and their spirits were going to speak for themselves.

“I am the spirit of the Dodo. Like my cousin the Moa, I couldn’t fly. Humans – Dutch sailors mainly – caused my demise, by eating me, or letting their rats eat my eggs, or by burning the forest around me. I only lasted eighty years after they had come. Not much of a swan song?”

The moa of Aotearoa, or New Zealand, speaks. “We congregated in immense flocks on the wide expanse of the South Island plains. We had never seen a human, and the idea that we might be hunted by creatures smaller than us on the ground rather than by the Haast eagle – the pouākai – was preposterous. We had no other natural enemies to contend with. That’s why we were so numerous. Then the Māori came and within a hundred years or so, decimated us.”

As a walrus I have a soft spot for indigenous people. They had a hard life, as nomads rather than peasants, and many still do. The Inuit I’ve talked about. But the Māori live close to that icy land by the pole in the south. The one that’s in danger of sliding into the sea. They had sent a representative to the gathering. Perhaps it was time to hear what she had to say. “Talk to us,” I said.

“Auē, koutou. I bring the grief of our people to this gathering. The life of the nomad is indeed hard. Going from one food source to another, catching and preserving from one season to another. But we didn't realise that large numbers were no guarantee against scarcity unless we limited our harvest. By then it was too late. The proud moa was no more. Only acres of bones were left.”

“What message from the past would you say to humans gathered here?” I asked the moa sorrowfully.

“We too had grown in numbers and a hundred thousand of us were living in harmony with our food sources, because we were vegetarians. But carnivores grow fat when the food is easy, without heed to the final result. We both lost out.”

A Māori child asked “Couldn't we have lived together as friends?”

“The hunter seldom sees they are the friend of the hunted,” said the Moa. “For without us their lives became much harder. A weka is no substitute even for the food contained in one moa's egg.”

“Yes,” I said. “We too were hunted by the Inuit for our ivory and oil and the raw materials of early existence. We weren't considered important enough to protect until 1972, although we are willing if not happy to gift ourselves within moderation to the native people for their subsistence. There are enough of us in the hundreds of thousands not to be endangered. But no one is safe until we all hear each other.”

On and on the gathering shared their reminiscences, their mourning, their losses. No one spoke for others. But soon it was a time for hope and solutions. “What have we learned from all that has happened in the past?” asked the elephant from his dais in the centre of the cavern. “Who’s is going to act in defence of Planet earth and its creatures, including you humans?”

This was the moment of truth. We had heard the plaintiff’s stories, and the protagonist’s mea culpa explanations. These had lasted most of the day. But now was the moment of truth. What was going to happen?

The youngest human spoke up clear as a crystal bell. “How can we all live together when even people can’t always live together?”

There were the usual “Well we’re better than you” from both animals and humans. But no one disputed the basic premise that we each had a problem in our own groups that needed solving. Was it a shortage of food, or mates, or places to live without overcrowding? Perhaps there really were too many of us, animals and humans.

The young boy spoke again. “The animals are our brothers and sisters. They are wise and have a lot of advice to give us. But we have to listen with our hearts.” There was applause, if you can call hooves beating the ground or flippers clapping, applause. It seemed all the beings were being asked to shift our way of living in a simple but quite fundamental way that involved changing our attitudes about life. All life, not just human life.

Suddenly the lion roared into life. She said gruffly “There are too many people all over the world, everywhere there are too many of you. Why do you have so many children? They do not get eaten by animals. You only need two to replace you.”

A cow said “And why do you enslave so many of what you call domestic animals?” There are more cows than humans, all in your service. Please stop killing or imprisoning animals for food or sport.”

There was a rumbling of agreement amongst the farm animals and others who humans treated as fair game. But the murmuring tapered off, and the beings fell silent, thinking about what to do next.

Suddenly in the hush throughout the cavern, a greenish flickering light appeared, and danced to the centre. “I am the spirit of nature,” a clear voice said, understandable by every being there. “You may call me Deva, Raven or Tāne-mahuta – whatever suits you and is true-hearted from your spirit.”

“You have all forgotten – especially humans – that there are rules that must be obeyed in the end, even if you can get away with something now. There is no such thing as a free lunch. There are now seven billion of you, and there will be twice as many in another sixty years – if you last that long.”

“Here is what you must do between you, and as the highest order being, humans must take responsibility for this. It’s a simple list as it’s getting late but I want you all to remember it, and hold the humans to account:

- Believe you have a purpose beyond the drudgery of mere existence. Be part of the life force.
- Look after your ecosystems, for Mother Earth, Papa-tū-ā-nuku, or whomever you acknowledge as the great spirit of nature.
- Only use things and resources that can be replaced, or are long-lived and don’t pollute this precious world.
- Reproduce less, and live in simpler communities where your sustenance can come from close by.
- Make your communities places of harmony where you can feel safe and connected.

The sense of agreement and cooperation that ensued was palpable. There was little discussion. We agreed to meet as a council in a year’s time. Then we began to disperse with the strange bond of friendship that had developed between the species almost tangible. We were closer together as we filed out into the twilight still lit from the sun on the clouds. We touched amiably as we strolled along.

As we went I did a dance, to the amazement of some. “You should see me in the water I said. That’s really something. I’m graceful, acrobatic, twisting and turning, I’m a star I really am.” No one suggested otherwise.
