

**“Whales and Wonder”**  
**By Louise Reeve, 21 September 2025, Plymouth**

**Opening Music: ‘Whale Music for Relaxation and Meditation’ by Kamal (link: <https://youtu.be/BCBX-6HBp40?si=Sp4dkyvAun184uZr>)**

**Opening Words and reminder about recording**

Hello everyone and welcome to our service. I am Louise Reeve, a worship leader at Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians, and today’s services is ‘Whales and Wonder’.

I will now light our chalice with these words by the Unitarian Universalist author Rev. Leslie Takahashi.

**‘We Gather As Many Drops’**

“We gather as many drops, each winding our own path down life’s surfaces and ruts.  
Here we pool together as a single body, flowing together for a time.  
Together we are a stream, at times even a river,  
for with our shared force we can travel toward oceans of meaning and seas of connection.  
May it be so.”

**First hymn: “We Sing The Joy of Living’, no. 233, Hymns for Living**

We sing the joy of living,  
We sing the mystery,  
Of knowledge, lore and science,  
Of truth that is to be;  
Of searching, doubtful, testing,  
Of deeper insights gained,  
Of freedom claimed and honoured,  
Of minds that are unchained.

We sing the joy of living,  
We sing of harmony,  
Of texture, sounds and colours,  
To touch, to hear, to see;  
Of order, rhythm, meaning,  
Of chaos and of strife,  
Of richness of sensation,  
Of the creating life.

We sing the joy of living,  
We sing of ecstasy,  
Of warmth, of love, of passion,  
Of flights of fantasy,  
We sing the joy of living,  
The dear, the known, the strange,  
The moving, pulsing, throbbing –  
A universe of change.

*Music: ‘St Theodolph’ melchior Teschner c 1613;  
har. Johann Sebastian Bach. 1685 - 1750  
Words: Deane Starr 1923 - . Used by permission.*

### **Reading 1: 'Close Call With A Humpback Whale' by John Bantin**

Introduction: "This next reading is a modern encounter with a humpback whale, told by diver and author John Bantin based on story from another diver, Bret Gilliam."

Rarely will a mother and calf be seen without an escort male that takes responsibility for shepherding the pair safely, but woe betide the diver who dare to annoy the escort with aggressive behaviour. During his Navy diving days in 1971, Bret Gilliam had worked collecting data from fast attack nuclear submarines. It was in the superb visibility afforded by the waters off the US Virgin Islands. During the long underwater decompression stops required, he had often seen humpback whales. He became an enthusiastic hump back spotter and this eventually led to 20 annual trips to the Silver Banks, an area between the Dominican Republic and Grand Turk. Its now an area well known among divers for encounters with humpback whales and their young calves.

"Standing on their tails and bobbing in the gentle evening sea, they positioned themselves with their heads turned, to present eyes the size of hockey pucks that seemed to look right through you. At that point, the experience of swimming with our military's subs seemed pretty pale by comparison."

## ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS

It was common to see pregnant females disappear and reappear a day or so later with a calf in tow, but nobody has ever recorded a mother whale giving birth. Where they go to and how the birth is accomplished, is still one of life's big mysteries.

It was February 1993. The weather was not too good and it was extremely windy. Diving out in the open ocean was out of the question and "for want of anything better to do", Bret left the boat and went alone for a shallow dive in the lee of a coral reef, swimming among the coral pillars that punctuated the sandy bottom. Even here he could not escape the whales' presence, with their haunting songs flowing over and around the underwater landscape and filling his ears as he swam.

He was very surprised indeed to round a coral head and come face to face with a mother whale and her calf. "I was fewer than 3 m (10 ft) from them," he recalled. What an opportunity for an underwater photographer!

The whales were resting with the baby lying under its mother's watchful gaze. It was the smallest calf Bret had ever seen at around only 2 m long (6 ft) and 110 kg (250 lb). In fact, he remembered thinking it was about the same size and weight as him.

"My mind was racing. Was this a newborn calf? Had I nearly stumbled on what every photographer in the world had sought for decades? Certainly, the calf was the right size and clearly was so young that he couldn't hold his breath for more than few seconds. I cradled my camera and began to line up the shots.

Sure enough, the pair were waiting for me as I eased around the massive coral buttress into water that was now barely 5 m (15 ft) deep.

It was surreal to see this leviathan mother some 15 m (50 ft) in length easing herself over the smooth sandy bottom. Her massive pectoral fins gently grazed the sand leaving a trench marking her trail, while the baby rode the pressure wave just above her head. The depth lessened even more and her belly barely cleared the bottom. I moved to the coral head and clung to an outcrop to let them pass, all the while firing away with my wide angle."

As the mother's 6 m (20 ft) tail fluke filled his lens from only inches away, Bret began a slow pursuit but all the while wondering why there

## CLOSE CALL WITH A HUMPBACK WHALE

an escort male supervising the pair. Maybe the rambunctious males were simply too cautious of the shallow water that might have stranded

It was suddenly aware that the bottom was no longer 5 m (15 ft) away from him. His fin tips hit something solid when he kicked and he went down thinking he'd let himself drift onto the coral head.

Wrong! The male I had been speculating about was directly below me, having been masked in the gloom before. He had now set his sights on moving up to place himself between his new family and me. He decelerated his slow swim and I now found him about to surface directly between my legs!

My left were the jagged coral branches of the reef top and Mr. Whale had time that moment to raise his pectoral fin to just clear the hazard. He soared over the coral head like a stunt airplane turning around the pylon. That effectively killed any escape in that direction. A look behind confirmed that the whale's back would make contact with me in seconds. I gulped a breath and dove over his head with my hands massaging his widow's peak on the way by. Finning to give us some space I ended up about 1 m (3 ft) off the bottom and under his pectoral fin.

Oh, this isn't so bad, I thought. He'll just glide over me and then come up. Wrong again! He chose that exact moment to stop and simultaneously dropped his pectoral fin neatly pinning me to the sand. I always wanted a close encounter but this was ridiculous. There he was, flat on my back with several tons of deadweight pectoral gently crushing me. I never even thought of struggling. I lay quietly and went dead. Rather aptly, I thought.

In my constrained view I could look the big guy in the eye from about 1.5 m (5 ft) away. He articulated his gaze back to me and sized me up. After about 30 seconds he eased up his pectoral fin and moved away. I put one hand up and fended myself off his belly as he moved at a snail's pace. Finally, the tail passed overhead and close enough to let me count the smallest barnacles. I gratefully hit the surface for some much needed air.

While I was taking an inventory of my own body parts and mentally wondering if I qualified for hypoxia-induced brain damage, all three

Whales came at me from the shallows. The male led the mother and her baby deftly through the reef and then waited for them to exit to the deeper water. We regarded each other without malice as he ended up once again on the surface right next to me. I fired off a few frames and then he moved gradually away into the blue with his charges.”

**Second hymn, ‘Others Call It God’, no. 233, Hymns for Living**

A fire-mist and a planet,  
A crystal and a cell,  
A star-fish and a saurian,  
And caves where cave-folk dwell;  
The sense of law and beauty,  
A face turned from the clod –  
Some call it evolution,  
And others call it God.

Haze on the far horizon,  
The infinite tender sky,  
The ripe rich tint of cornfields,  
And wild geese sailing high;  
And over high and low land,  
The charm of golden rod –  
Some people call it nature,  
And others call it God.

Like tides on a crescent sea-beach,  
When the moon is new and thin,  
Into our hearts high yearnings  
Come welling, surging in,  
Come from the mystic ocean  
Whose rim no foot has trod –  
Some people call it longing,  
And others call it God.

A picket frozen on duty,  
A mother starved for her brood,  
And Socrates drinking hemlock,  
And Jesus on the rood;  
And millions, who, though nameless,  
The straight, hard pathway trod –  
Some call it consecration,  
And others call it God.

*Words: from William Herbert Carruth, 1859 - 1924*

*Tune: ‘Aurelia’ by Samuel Sebastian Wesley, 1810 - 1878*

**Reading 2 – Excerpt from ‘Whale Nation’ by Heathcote Williams**

“From space, the planet is blue.  
From space, the planet is the territory  
Not of humans, but of the whale.  
Blue seas cover seven-tenths of the of the earth’s surface,  
And are the domain of the largest brain ever created,

With a fifty-million-year-old smile.  
Ancient, unknown mammals left the land  
In search of food or sanctuary,  
And walked into the water.  
Their arms and hands changed into water-wings;  
Their tails turned into boomerang-shaped tail-flukes,  
Enabling them to fly, almost weightless, through the oceans;  
Their hind-legs disappeared, buried deep within their flanks.  
Free from land-based pressures:  
Free from droughts, earthquakes, ice-ages, volcanoes, famine,  
Larger brains evolved, ten times as old as man's...  
Other creatures, with a larger cerebral cortex...

Whale families, whale tribes,  
All have different songs:  
An acoustic picture-language,  
Spirited pulses relayed through water  
At five times the speed sounds travels through air,  
Varied enough to express complex emotions,  
Cultural details,  
History,  
News,  
A sense of the unknown.  
A lone Humpback may put on a solo concert lasting for days.  
Within a Humpback's half-hour song  
There are a hundred million bytes.  
A million changes of frequency,  
And a million tonal twists...  
An Odyssey, as information-packed as Homer's,  
Can be told in thirty minutes;  
Fifty-million-year-old sagas of continuous whale mind:  
Accounts of the forces of nature;  
The minutiae of a shared consciousness;  
Whale dreams;  
The accumulated knowledge of the past;  
Rumours of ancestors, the Archaeoceti,  
With life-spans of two and three hundred years;  
Memories of loss;  
Memories of ideal love;  
Memories of meetings."  
From: <https://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article3627-whale-song.html>

### **Prayer - "Prayers and Dreamings" by Rebecca A. Edmiston-Lange**

*with a bow to Ysaye Barnwell and Stephanie Kaza*

"Spirit within all, mysterious force giving shape to  
life, miraculous source and river of being,  
help us to know who we are, to see our place in the  
history of the earth and in the family of things;  
help us to see that we are part of all that ever was—  
our grandmother's prayers and our grandfather's dreamings,  
our mother's courage and our father's hope.

In our bones lies the calcium of antediluvian creatures,  
in our veins courses the water of seas;  
we are part of all that ever was,  
born of this earth, riders upon a cosmic ocean;  
we are not separate from nature, we are nature,  
part of that same spirit that turned scales into  
feathers and birdsong into speech;  
we live by the sun; we move by the stars,  
we eat from the earth; we drink from the rain.

O divine spirit, help us know who we are  
and fill us with such love for this holy creation  
and gratitude for this awesome gift we call living,  
that we might claim our inheritance and live out our calling  
to bless the world and each other with our care." Amen

**Musical Interlude: 'Songs Of The Humpback Whale', Dr. Roger Payne (link:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=sjkxUA041nM>**

### **Third Hymn, 'Wide Green World' No. 216, Sing Your Faith**

Wide green world, we know and love you:  
clear blue skies that reach above you,  
moon-tugged oceans rising, falling,  
summer rain and cuckoo calling.  
Some wild ancient ferment bore us,  
us and all that went before us:  
life in desert, forest, mountain,  
life in stream and springing fountain.

We know how to mould and tame you,  
we have power to mar and maim you.  
Show us by your silent growing  
that which we should all be knowing:  
we are of you, not your master,  
we who plan supreme disaster.  
If with careless greed we use you  
inch by extinct inch we lose you.

May our births and deaths remind us  
others still will come behind us.  
That they also may enjoy you  
we with wisdom will employ you.  
That our care may always bless you.  
teach us we do not possess you.  
We are part and parcel of you.  
Wide green world, we share and love you.

*Tune 'Schmucke Dich' melody Johann Cruger, 1598 – 1662*  
*Words © June D. bell b. 1918. Used by permission*

## Address – ‘Whales and Wonder’

Some time ago, on the UK Unitarian Facebook page, someone posted the question: “Should worship involve the head, the heart or both?” One of many responses to this question was from someone concerned that there was a tendency, if we’re not careful, to produce a ‘themed lecture with hymns’. That was an inspiration for this service, along with the fact that at the time I looked at that post, it was February and I had just learned that the third Sunday in February is World Whale Day.

I tried to bear that in mind when I put this service together. Because I really could do a lecture about whales. I could just talk about them all morning. They are among the most wonderful creatures on earth. I could tell you how the beluga whale is the only whale to have a head that is not fused to its neck and can look at things without having to move its entire body, and that it has the nickname of the sea canary, because of its beautiful chirruping song. I could tell you about the new species of deep-diving American whale that was discovered only a couple of years ago.

We could think of all the sights we have seen recently on David Attenborough’s marvellous documentaries in the past few years. The clever humpback whales who blow nets of bubbles to herd fish into their mouths. The pods of fake killer whales who appear to have formed friendships and hunting partnerships with bottlenose dolphins. The mighty grey sperm whales who sleep vertically in the water and dive over 1000m into the lightless deep ocean to hunt giant squid with echolocation.

But this time together is for our spirits as well as our minds. When I asked on the same UK Unitarians discussion page ‘Has anyone got any thoughts about whales and spirituality’, the first thing that came back was ‘Watch the film, *Whale Rider!*’. If you haven’t seen it, it’s a New Zealand film about a twelve-year-old Māori girl whose ambition is to become the chief of her tribe, a position traditionally held only by men, who descend from their legendary ancestor, who rode a whale as he travelled from Hawaii to New Zealand to found a new nation.

When I think of the Christian tradition I grew up with, the first thing that comes to mind is somewhat less optimistic. Like many Sunday school kids, I spent a certain amount of time singing the song, “Have you heard the tale, of Jonah and the whale, way down at the bottom of the ocean?” It’s the most famous whale in the Bible, spoiled only slightly by the fact that it’s as likely to be a ‘giant fish’ as a whale, depending on your translation. And also by the fact that those of us who were a little older and had started studying biology realised that whales were not in fact hollow, like the whale in Disney’s Pinocchio, and that getting swallowed by a whale would in fact be really unpleasant. (Less fun fact about sperm whales; they’re the only creatures on earth capable of swallowing an adult human being whole.)

Jonah’s prayer is one of the most powerful expressions of faith in the face of despair and hopelessness in the Bible. When he had been cast overboard by the sailors of the ship he was travelling on, who were terrified of the storm he had brought on them by disobeying God, he was swallowed by the whale, and prayed:

1 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the whale, 2 saying,  
“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,  
and he answered me;  
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,



- and you heard my voice.
- 3 For you cast me into the deep,  
into the heart of the seas,  
and the flood surrounded me;  
all your waves and your billows  
passed over me.
- 4 Then I said, 'I am driven away  
from your sight;  
yet I shall again look  
upon your holy temple.'
- 5 The waters closed in over me to take my life;  
the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped about my head
- 6 at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down to the land  
whose bars closed upon me forever;  
yet you brought up my life from the pit,  
O LORD my God.
- 7 When my life was fainting away,  
I remembered the LORD,  
and my prayer came to you,  
into your holy temple.
- 8 Those who pay regard to vain idols  
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
- 9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Salvation belongs to the LORD!"
- 10 And the LORD spoke to the whale, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land."

There is another mysterious whale-creature in the Bible – Leviathan.

Leviathan appears in part God's reply to Job's complaint. Job was a man who had enjoyed great good fortune in life, until God tested his faith by permitting Satan to take away his riches, his family and his health. Though Job originally remains faithful, he eventually complains at this injustice saying: "I loathe my very life, therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I say to God: 'Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?'

When I was younger, I found God's reply very difficult to read, because it is not comforting at all. God does not explain anything to Job, but says, in essence, that a human mind cannot hope to understand the ways of the Creator. Part of God's reply is to say:

- "Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook  
or tie down its tongue with a rope?
- 2 Can you put a cord through its nose  
or pierce its jaw with a hook?
- 3 *Will it keep begging you for mercy?  
Will it speak to you with gentle words?*
- 4 *Will it make an agreement with you  
for you to take it as your slave for life?*
- 5 *Can you make a pet of it like a bird*

*or put it on a leash for the young women in your house?*

6 Will traders barter for it?

Will they divide it up among the merchants?

7 Can you fill its hide with harpoons

or its head with fishing spears?

8 If you lay a hand on it,

you will remember the struggle and never do it again!

9 Any hope of subduing it is false;

the mere sight of it is overpowering.

10 No one is fierce enough to rouse it.

Who then is able to stand against me?

11 Who has a claim against me that I must pay?

Everything under heaven belongs to me."

Again, it's an ambiguous whale, and whilst 'leviathan' these days is a term often used to refer to whales, many people translate it as a crocodile. No matter!

As an adult, I still don't find the book of Job comforting, but I now find it closer to my own views on spirituality. We know now that our own universe contains many mysteries we do not understand. We cannot touch dark matter, nor see infrared or ultra-violet. Humans can only hear part of a whale's song; we are not able to hear the lowest of the whale frequencies. Humans hear low frequency sounds starting at about 100 Hz, whereas whales sing as low as 30Hz. And indeed, whales themselves are mysterious and powerful creatures. One of the most famous whales of all, Moby-Dick, is a source of terror for the whaling crews trying to kill him, and even Captain Ahab, who has sworn revenge on the whale for biting off his leg, is simultaneously enraged by the whale and fascinated by its sheer size and essential otherness:

"It was a black and hooded head; and hanging there in the midst of so intense a calm, it seemed the Sphinx's in the desert. "Speak, thou vast and venerable head," muttered Ahab, "which, though ungarnished with a beard, yet here and there lookest hoary with mosses; speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest.

'That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world's foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou hast been where bell or diver never went; hast slept by many a sailor's side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down. Thou saw'st the locked lovers when leaping from their flaming ship; heart to heart they sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them.

Thou saw'st the murdered mate when tossed by pirates from the midnight deck; for hours he fell into the deeper midnight of the insatiate maw; and his murderers still sailed on unharmed—while swift lightnings shivered the neighbouring ship that would have borne a righteous husband to outstretched, longing arms. O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!"

'Moby-Dick, or The Whale', Herman Melville

I believe that the book of Job, echoed in Melville's description of the otherworldliness – to humans – of the whale's habitat, reminds us that we are part of the creation, but not the point of it. The nice idea that the world was created especially for our benefit is one that

has to go. When we ditch our anthropomorphic worldview, we become closer to understanding ourselves and our world. And, in my view, God, who I see as the maker of all things, but not a father-God. You may or may not agree with me there, but I think all of us here are seeking some form of deeper spiritual knowledge, and as Unitarians, if there's one thing we are committed to, it's increasing our knowledge.

We also see whales more closely. Where we previously saw monsters, or dumb animals to be exploited for lamp oil and ribs for corsets, we see what might be the closest thing to an alien intelligence we are likely to encounter any time soon. What is it like to be a whale? To have a body the size of a ship, with arteries a human could swim through? To find your food by echolocation, not sight? To be continually bathed in sound, continually communicating with your family and fellows, never apart from them?

Whales also remind us of our unhappy power to cause immense destruction of the natural world. Humans have hunted whales for almost as long as we have existed, and whilst that was understandable when we needed to survive, there is a great difference between a tradition of occasionally killing one or two whales, which many cultures revere as a spiritual tradition, and do not carry out lightly or casually, and the wholesale industrial slaughter our species has gone in for over the past couple of centuries. The founder of the Sea Shepherd activist group, Captain Paul Watson, wrote this poem:

#### **“Primate Monsters of the Deep (excerpt)**

In ancient times Leviathan was a mystery  
A mythic creature of wonder much revered  
But humankind was seeking dominance  
And thus began a bloody history  
And mankind became a species to be feared,  
With whales dying in pain for wealth and prominence

Intelligence wilfully destroyed to read books  
*Moby-Dick* read by the light of burning whales,  
Without a thought, blind to the connections  
By death's bright light, is read another book  
Thou shalt not kill is one of the lying tales.  
We define what is right by biased selections.”

Still more horrifying is the unthinking harm we can do. None of us here intended to fill the oceans with plastic, or make them so noisy with the sounds of our giant boats, oil rigs and submarines that it is hard for sea creatures to navigate them or communicate with each other. Yet many of us were moved to tears by David Attenborough's documentary showing a mother whale mourning the loss of her calf, which probably died through ingesting milk filled with plastic and chemicals.

I don't pretend an easy answer to any of these problems, but I also don't want to counsel despair. We can change. We have recently seen huge campaigns to limit single-use plastics and clear up litter. Wind power is likely to become the main source of power in the British Isles over the next few decades. Humans can go to great lengths to protect living beings, as well as harm them.

Through knowing our fellow creatures better, we come to know our world and ourselves better. One final story. Nearly five years ago, I dived on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. As I surfaced from my dive, one of the boat crew approached me and said quietly: “Take off your diving jacket, but keep your wetsuit and fins, put on a snorkel, and get back in the water – there are five minke whales swimming behind the boat.” One of those whales is

pictured on the order of service. I hung in the water behind the boat, watching the whales swimming back and forth unhurriedly.

One whale was accompanied by a much smaller whale, which I suspect was the whale equivalent of a teenager. As the two patrolled up and down, it was hard not to imagine the older whale pointing a fin at me and saying to the younger whale: 'And these funny-looking things that think they can swim are called humans...'

You shouldn't anthropomorphise too much. But as I looked into the whales' eyes, I knew there were fellow minds looking back at me. Then they departed into the blue.

## **Notices**

### **Final Hymn, "We Celebrate The Web of Life", no. 189, Sing Your Faith**

We celebrate the web of life',  
its magnitude we sing;  
for we can see divinity  
in every living thing,

A fragment of the perfect whole  
in cactus and in quail,  
as much in tiny barnacle  
as in the great blue whale.

Of ancient dreams we are the sum;  
our bones link stone to star,  
and bind our future worlds to come  
with worlds that were and are.

Respect the water, land and air  
which gave all creatures birth;  
protect the lives of all that share  
the glory of the earth.

*Words © Alicia S. Carpenter, b. 1930 Used by permission.*

*Music, Tune 'Christus der est mein Leben' Melchior Vulpus, c. 1560 - 1616*

### **Closing words by Rev Joel Miller.**

"Let Our Lives Be a Prayer  
Let our lives be a prayer  
That waters dry souls  
Mends broken hearts  
Refuses to be terrorised  
Seeks this world's beauty  
And carries us through its storms. Amen."

**Closing Music: 'Whale Music for Relaxation and Meditation' by Kamal (link: <https://youtu.be/BCBX-6HBp40?si=Sp4dkyvAun184uZr>)**

