

These great swimming serpents, whales, gliding along the crest of the water seem amused. I had never seen one just inches away from me. Photos certainly, but not these barnacle covered swimming, slithery, emissaries from some prehistory, a secret past time. No, these prehistoric, slimy behemoths were strangers.

I'm in the sweetly and brilliantly blue Pacific Ocean off Mexico's Baja peninsula, just at the Bay of the Solitude, a couple of hundred miles north of Cabo San Lucas. There, before me is this mythic creature, playing with the small launch which holds me safe above the water. Bump, thump, nudge and the whale is frisking about, showing us her barnacle bites. A back, spotted with white, crusty spots emerges from the edge of the boat, then like a water snake slithering through the wetness, the back rises and, like a black enchantment, slithers along beside the little boat. Behind the great 40 ton monster is her 3 week old baby. The bay behind the Island of Solitude is a well known whale whelping destination. The mother whales after gorging on plankton in Alaska, mate, swim south to Mexico to the slithery peninsula drooling, unfurling out of the backside of California, find their way to this inlet off the Pacific and give birth.

Then they spend a few weeks in the protection of the water, the clear, clean water here, silently passing along survival skills and finally they return to Alaska to repeat the process.

I couldn't help thinking about Melville and Moby Dick. Here are we, a group of gawkers, launched in a small boat riding in the water very close to these vast water animals. Rather like Melville when he sailed or when he wrote about the Pequod and being in whale hunts. We, too, are hunting whales and shooting them. But when we have shot them we don't harm or kill them. No, we are only shooting them with cameras seeking "See-where-I-have-been" trophies.

Getting jostled one can easily imagine how frightening it must have been in the great days of the whale oil trade. Here is this great beast beneath the waves, with a capacity to hold it's breath for 5 minutes at the cause of barbs flying at it, largely missing, but often bruising and angering the creature.

I wouldn't want to have been a whaler, a whale hunter. No, not me.

The curious element here is that the whales are not vicious creatures, no, they are vegetarians, eaters of sea weed from the bottom of the sea, whose instinct, now that the days of the whale oil trade are long ago history, part of the early nineteenth century and relegated to books gathering dust on shelves, is to play.

How utterly peculiar to be in a launch hearing sailors, the launch drivers, call to the whales, "Here, Chiquita...Over here, Baby" They are putting their hands into the surface of the water ruffling it, trying to get the attention of the whales, trying to call them from their undersea hiding places. "Over here, Baby", they cry trying to attract these swimmers, to beseech them to come and nudge the boats, to jostle us. How far we have come, how very far from a time when whale and men were mortal enemies.

It seems sad that these sweet, playful creatures were sought for their oil. Very sad. They appear to be almost clownish, goofy is a word which comes to mind.

Now, the mother whale comes to the surface and there on her back is this little, slithery baby, resting, being picked up, cleansed and carted along. Shimmering in the brilliant sunlight. Glistening, floating on it's back, something which I had no idea was possible.

Slowly, the mother whale descends and the baby with her. Then, later, the waters break and one sees the snout, the blow hole, the whale's back-to-front nose, emerge from the water and blow like a geyser, a jet of water into the air, the clean shining air and make a hissing sound and the spray goes everywhere.

In that brief moment one gets a clear picture, a complete sense of the power and the force of this creature. Very tough, awesome, in fact. This sometimes goofy swimmer is a being of magnificence and very real sway here. Maybe that's something we should learn from them. They can be playful because there is no one really to threaten them. They are just too damned big.

Ah, to be a whale, to frolic in the oceans, playful and easy, and powerful. After a while the boats bearing the observers to the lives of whales began to speed back to the starting point... rushing toward the end of these awe-filled hours of observation.

Our romance with these deep sea giants was done. We were going back to the shore and they were swimming off to continue, like circus clowns to enact future goofy moments.

Upon returning to the seashore there was civilization and dryness, all the elements which make our lives on land authentic. Things from the sea, jewelery made from shells, and little nothings, made of mother of pearl, the shells of crustaceans are available everywhere. But the memory of the frolicsome charm of the giants of the sea remains with us.

There is a joy-loving nature within all of us which addresses the lives of whales, sweetly swimming through the mysterious waters of life. That these watery giants live and play and swim on to future simple contentments is a valuable experience to have had. We are all linked, we all love our children and want to play with them and to play, generally, and we all want to avoid death.

Or so I believe.