

Cetacean Classroom

TONI AND I HAD BEEN COMING with the students to observe and film orca behavior in the show pool at Vancouver Aquarium, and today was our first behind the scenes trip. The management agreed to let us come in at eight a.m. when the feeders and trainers arrived, and observe the orcas and dolphin until ten a.m., opening hour. Of course, we had received strict instructions, and we adhered to them.

White Wing was a small dolphin who performed several times a day with the orcas. She spent the evening and early morning in the small pool adjacent to the show pool with a young adult orca, Hyak. The mature female orca, Skana, spent the evening alone in the show pool. As six of us gathered around the pool containing White Wing, she moved from person to person, making eye contact, gesturing with her rostrum, opening her jaws and squeaking. Everyone of us watched one of the aquarium employees reach down and touch White Wing on the head, and each of us hoped to be able to do the same.

White Wing came up out of the water in front of Toni, but just as Toni's open hand was to contact White Wing, Toni experienced momentary fright at the sight of the dolphin's open mouth and teeth. Her fingers drew up into a fist, and White Wing snapped her. I was next, and as White Wing came up to greet me I was not afraid of being bitten so she gently closed her mouth on my open hand. And then I caressed her head.

I took the opportunity to point out to the students that the world often will oblige us, that our expectations influence our behavior and therefore the response of other creatures to us. In this case of White Wing snapping Toni's hand, Toni had communicated her fear to White Wing, and White Wing had communicated back to Toni a message that could be interpreted two ways: a) White Wing doesn't like you; or, b) White Wing doesn't like you to be afraid. The former assessment would only confirm Toni's fear of being bitten by a dolphin, a self-fulfilling prophesy, but the latter would lead to an awareness that dolphins are extremely perceptive and good teachers.

I added that if White Wing had really wanted to hurt Toni, she could have very easily, but her bite brought no blood. It was more like a scolding. Confirmation was in order so I asked Toni to relax, to reach out to White Wing just as she had done before but without any fear and apprehension. I reminded her that White Wing meant no harm and that if she would simply trust White Wing and follow her affection then White Wing would respond accordingly. Surely Toni believed all this after having watched the rest of us touch White Wing without being snapped. Toni reached down over the edge of the pool and, as expected, White Wing came up, and let Toni pet her this time.

Toni wanted to know more about the perceptual capacities of dolphins and orcas: could they perceive human intentions directly without their ordinary senses or did they possess extra-sensory perception? The students had been studying sonar and they had a real appreciation of just how very sophisticated communication is in some cetaceans. We discussed the possibility that before sonar was discovered, a nat-

uralist observing dolphins easily might have suspected that they communicated or detected things by e.s.p., the point being that what we now term extra sensory may not be that at all but simply a sensory faculty not yet understood. Another case in point was the use of electrical fields by eels living in fresh water with poor visibility. These eels can sense and discriminate among other species that enter their electrical fields. According to the once accepted definition of the existing sensory systems, these eels possessed e.s.p.

The conversation soon came around to psychic communication in humans, and being thoroughly imprinted on the accepted doctrines of science by this point in their schooling, the students imitated their teachers satisfactorily. Not only were they convinced that humans do not possess e.s.p., animals were out of the question, and Steve offered a word of finality on the subject: what difference would it make? All we can do is rely on the empirically measurable. End of discussion.

Well, not quite. Candy harbored some doubts, and though somewhat fearful of rejection by the other students, asked me what I thought about e.s.p. I recounted a few experiences in my life which had convinced me that it exists. I mentioned the time during class break at the University of Washington when I commented to a couple of students that Elvis Presley would die soon. Why those words ever came from my mouth, I hadn't the foggiest notion, but one of the students entered my comment in her personal diary that evening. That same evening Elvis did die, and it was not until the student brought me the passage in her diary that I recalled having said what I did. That was only the beginning, however, and I went on to describe a similar incident several months later when I was driving with a friend from Bellingham to

Seattle and suddenly expressed an intuition that "a great singer will die today." My friend queried me for more information but I had none. Several hours later in the day a gas station attendant who was washing our window said that a news broadcast had just announced the death of Bing Crosby in Spain.

Crosby's death had not been announced until after my intuition about "a great singer," but at the time I had it he may have already been dead. Perhaps I was receiving radio or TV broadcasts being transmitted from Spain hours before the news broke on the west coast. As for Elvis, my prediction was made at least twelve hours before his death.

The students resisted the plausibility of my personal experiences; they feared believing something which could harm their professional careers. I went on to say that only twice in my life had I predicted deaths, the first time I accurately named the person, the second time I didn't name the person; though many singers would not fall within the description of "great," Bing Crosby certainly did.

Because I had experienced a psychic communication with orcas, and I wanted to be able to open the students' minds to the possible, I proposed that we conduct a small experiment then and there on psychic communication. We all sat down next to Skana at the end of the large pool, and Skana stayed there with us, opening her mouth and protruding her tongue, inviting us to scratch it, something orcas are fond of. I told everyone to avoid physical contact with Skana for the time being, and asked each student to stand up, walk to their right around the pool to the platform on the far side and then sit down in a quasi-lotus posture with their eyes closed on the edge of the pool. I told them to sit there silently while we counted to a

hundred, to avoid making any movements or sounds, then, when the next person in line replaced them, to stand up and walk around the rest of the pool back to the group and sit down.

The first two students followed the instructions properly, and throughout these trials Skana stayed at the end of the pool with the rest of us. I went third and behaved exactly as they had with one difference: as soon as I sat down with my eyes closed I did not count, but I did concentrate on Skana and said these words silently in my mind. "Skana, if you hear me then come to me. Come to me Skana and show me that you read my thoughts." The students were observing me and taking notes on Skana's behavior. Within five seconds after I sat down I heard the sound of Skana emerging immediately in front of me, and when I opened my eyes there she was with her head pointed straight at mine a few inches away. I closed my eyes and continued mentally concentrating on Skana and silently repeated these words, "Thank you Skana for hearing me, thank you for showing me."

When I stood up and returned to the group, Skana swam back to the end of the pool where we were. The students were awed by what they had seen, and wanted to know what I had done, but I told them that we had to complete the experiment, so the last two followed the routine with expected results: Skana stayed with the group.

When the last student returned I explained to them what I had done differently than them, and we concluded that perhaps psychic communication with other beings is possible after all. I reminded them that our evidence was not conclusive, that in principle many experiments would need to be conducted, and

that in light of serious research in e.s.p., it might be expected that not everyone nor every orca would produce the same results. Intentions are vitally important in all forms of communication, and a person who repeated my covert behavior without really believing in his psychic ability or that of the orca may fail.

In the same way that Toni's attitudes towards White Wing governed White Wing's behavior toward her, a skeptic about e.s.p. might influence results negatively. That is precisely what e.s.p. research has found: many people guessing cards performed way below the level of chance, so poorly in fact that the only statistical explanation was that they had to have known what the right answers were to make so many wrong ones. Perhaps right thinking would create right living. Perhaps right minds make right worlds.