

**April 14, 2024**

## **Beloved community**

We have come together in this moment, guided by words from the Apostle Paul as he ministered to the churches in Galatia, as written in Galatians 6. “Carry each other’s burdens and in this way fulfill the law of Christ.”

Across the span of time since the words from Paul, there are these modern day words rising from the rolling hills of Kentucky, written by novelist, poet, and environmentalist Wendell Berry, from his novel **Jayber Crew** - “there are moments when the heart is generous and then it knows that, for better or worse, our lives are woven together here, one with one another, and with the place, and with all living things.”

These are the testimonies of the people called Quakers – Simplicity – Peace – Integrity – Community – Equality – Stewardship. Perhaps none speaks so deeply about the human yearning, that deep, deep down to the soul longing to belong, to be heard and to be known than does the testimony of community. We seek community at the close of worship on every first day when we set aside time to share our joys and concerns, to compound our joys and carry each other’s burdens, when we call on our hearts to be generous, to be woven together.

There is a story about what it means to be in community, not the outward expressions of community, such as shared geography, language, culture, religion, but that deep down inward expression that defies mere human words to define. While at times mythical and mystical, this story comes from the deep cold waters of the Pacific off the coast of Alaska. It is told with a reverence so deeply held that it can be physically felt, as are so many stories told in this place known as the Last Frontier – Alaska – the name taken from the indigenous Aleut language, meaning great land – this place both mythical and mystical. There are so many stories here, stories about the totems in Sitka and in Potlatch Park in Ketchikan and scattered throughout Alaska, the tallest standing at 132 feet in the tiny village of Kake, with its less than 1,000 residents. Listen to the words of the indigenous Tlingit tour guide describe the totems, how they are not religious artifacts but vessels for a community’s history, values and traditions, each one telling family stories.

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Encased within the intricate carvings there is history that will last forever, for there is this law in Alaska that no one can destroy a totem. This native to this land speaks in words almost whispered when he speaks of the totems, such is the depth of reverence, not only elevating the totem but the storyteller as well.

There is this story told to ten or so tourists who left the opulence of their cruise ship to do what some tourists choose to do along the coastal waters of Alaska, to set foot on what seems, for want of better words, little more than a tin sardine can like boat, with a wooden bench on either side, piloted by a wrinkled and greying captain, with a young twenty something to guide the tourists through their adventure in that tin sardine can like boat to go out in search of whales.

She is young and not native to this land, coming in for the season to work and then going back home to college or other work once the tourists and the cruise ships are gone. In her voice there is that same tone that was in the voice of the indigenous guide talking about the totems, as it was in the voices of those leading tours along paths in the Tongass National Forest, the largest in the United States with 16 million acres, which includes the majestic but disappearing Mendenhall Glacier, melting away day by day by day.

Her language is English. Her words are reverent. She is, it seems, in one accord with them, the rulers of the deep waters during the Alaskan summer season, the Orcas. She calls them by human names, much as we name our dogs and cats.

There is Molly and Rose and Oliver and more. Their photos are in a notebook to not only share with tourists, but to record for scientific purposes each time they are spotted and where they are spotted. In Alaska, in these waters, the whales are revered by all, from the scientific expeditions with their large ships, to larger tourist boats, right down to the smallest sardine-can size boat.

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Everyone shares in the welfare of the whales, every floating device on the water and every human in those floating devices, serving as scientists and recorders, even the most timid of tourists who are instructed how to yell out 'whale at twelve o'clock, three o'clock, six o'clock, or nine o'clock' upon being the first to spot a tail breach the water. While each whale is given a human name, they also have a scientific number maintained in those notebooks that are on every vessel, even the smallest sardine can size boat, recording the migration, births, deaths of those who form communities called pods into an international database, part of the effort to save them from extinction as their food sources disappear as the ocean waters continue to warm.

They will breach the water, these most magnificent of beings, with their tail fins high in the air. It is then that vessels all around will call out that 'whale 12:00 o'clock, 6:00 o'clock' and such to other vessels, be they tourist, commercial or scientific, announcing the good news of sightings of Molly, Rose, Oliver and more, for the markings on each dorsal fin, called the saddle patch, is as individually different as the fingerprints of human beings. Should one of the known whales not be spotted by any vessel by the middle of the season, it is reasoned that the number of whales has decreased by one - and too many seasons have passed with their numbers dwindling - one by one by one.

They are found each season in their pods from ten up to fifteen or twenty in each pod, forming their own distinct community. Each pod is a matriarchy, led by the oldest grandmother. Scientists are in awe of their intelligence, of their highly developed communication skills, with each pod having elements of universal whale language, while also developing their own dialects within their community, not unlike humans where distinctions can be heard between someone across the ocean in England and someone across the river in the rolling hills of Kentucky. Like humans, Orcas can and do sing.

On that tin sardine-can size boat on one whale watching tour, a story was told. It might be told in many of the tourist boats that fill the waters. It could be that it is told in one tin sardine-can size boat every time it goes out with a new

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group of tourists. For those who hear this story, a part of Alaska, its waters, and the Orcas never leave them.

It began as a rumbling, a crackling message from one boat to another boat and then another. Something out of the ordinary was taking place. In the vastness of the ocean, there is a pattern to life, to the comings and goings, to the changes of the seasons, to life for those who live above the water and those who live below it. The messages grew in number, filled with more questioning and wondering. The routine of hunting, feeding, and living was different in one pod. Those recording their actions from the boats noted more deliberation, as if all the members of this whale community were purposeful, driven beyond their routine.

It was only a matter of time before those in the boats collectively understood what was happening. The pod was moving in one direction with a purpose, carrying a shared burden. After a gestation period of more than seventeen months, a mother Orca gives birth underwater to one calf, with calves ranging up to eight and a half feet in length and weighing up to 350 pounds. Shortly after giving birth, the mother dives below the body of her newborn, places her head under its body and lifts it to the surface, where the newborn takes its first breath of air and begins its life.

It was noted in one boat, and then another, and then another, until the story was spreading along the coastline. This pod, going in one purposeful direction, was carrying the lifeless body of a calf, passing it from the head of one adult member of the community to the next so that it would not sink to the ocean floor, passing it kilometer after kilometer after kilometer towards that destination – much as it is the custom among some humans to serve as pallbearers to carry a beloved to a final place of rest. That destination was that place known as the whale graveyard ... the place where whales go to die, to be with their ancestors forevermore.

It was late one afternoon when the pod came to its destination, small outcroppings of rugged rock and sparse foliage uninhabitable to humans in

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the distance. As the sun was sinking into the far horizon beyond those small outcroppings, it is said that this pod, this community, formed, for what can best be described in human terms, a circle. Within the circle, one whale moved to the center, the grieving mother, holding the stillborn calf above the water. It is known that whales speak to each other in their own language, that they even sing. In those final precious moments as the mother held up the lifeless body that had once been a promise for her endangered species, perhaps they together, in community, in their language, prayed. In their own language they may have shared words of comfort. They may have sung together – a song of loss - of communal grief – a hymn perhaps.

As the last slivers of orange and yellow and gold of the sunset reached the bottom of the far-off horizon, the mother backed away and back into the circle, allowing her calf to drop to the graveyard on the ocean floor, to be with others of its kind forevermore. After a few minutes, perhaps a time of silence for the community to bear the burden together, the circle broke, and led by the grandmother of the pod, left the burial ground to do as all living things most do - carry onward – even when the burden seems too much - to use words from Quaker John Woolman when writing about injustice – when we shall be broken to pieces.

And now with the story told, may we sit here together in the silence, to meditate on that testimony that is most needed when we shall be broken to pieces, to gather in community so that we may carry each other through the depths of despair as deep and as cold as the ocean, as the whales have taught us, even unto death. And then that we should in this moment enter into our silence, our meditations, our prayers with the words from the Apostle Paul, “Carry each other’s burdens.”

As our silence ends, we will prepare for rise of Meeting by asking for joys and concerns, to lift them up into the Light, both those spoken and unspoken, lest those unspoken take us too deep into our own despair and we shall be broken to pieces. There may be some rustling and restlessness even as we are queried as to what is on our hearts as individuals and as a community – some may exit the sanctuary quietly, as others wait their time to share.

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Do we, with patience and reverence, as Wendell Berry says, take these as moments when our hearts should be made generous and woven together, made one with one another?

Carry each other's burdens – that message from the Apostle Paul. A modern-day Paul, Paul the poet, philosopher, and singer, brings us the same message, in what he called his 'little hymn,' inspired, as was much of his writing, by voices that were not always heard or that cried out from the darkness, from longing and suffering, from the depths of despair as deep as the ocean, broken to pieces.

He recorded it with his long-time musical partner, the two of them childhood friends from grade school. By the time of their work together on this little hymn, the childhood friends and longtime musical collaborators were learning personally and professionally what it means to be broken to pieces as their lives and careers one with the other came to an end.

The song, his 'little hymn,' was inspired in part as he listened to the gospel music of a group called the Swan Silvertones, considered by many as one of the greatest gospel groups of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for their tight harmonies and sophisticated vocal arrangements. It was in their song *Oh Mary Don't You Weep* that this Paul found the one line that would be key to the lyrics that he would include in the song that would become part of the soundtrack of what history now calls the Viet Nam era.

It endures still, his little hymn, as relevant and as reverent today as it was when it was written and recorded, the still haunting musical refrains, the lyrics that bring some measure of assurance of community, lest we become broken to pieces. Let us join together to pray that it may be a soundtrack for us in this era of division, conflict, injustices, with hate more pervasive than love. May Paul's little hymn nudge our spirits so that in this time and in this place, we, despite our brokenness, pronounce our commitment one with one another, to be a beloved community, our lives woven together with each other, the place, and with all living things. (*Music – Bridge Over Troubled Water*)

