

four: practice

(p35)

What are the intergenerational practices that generated dorsal fins in some dolphins and whales? What experience-based wisdom resulted in the ever-expanding spines and blubber of bowhead whales or the adaptation of sideways swimming river dolphins? What do the blue whales know that lets them fast all day and sing across the planet?

I believe in the possibility of dorsal, or stabilizing practices in our own lives. I am committed to the development of backbone and core muscle in the crooked life of at least one person with scoliosis (me). We can cultivate practices for finding each other in a shifting world. We can each create an intentional approach to what we take in and put out. What are the intergenerational and evolutionary ways that we become what we practice? How can we navigate oppressive environments with core practices that build community, resistance, and more loving ways of living? Yes. I do have dorsal-fin envy. On the coast of North Carolina you can sometimes see the fins of *Lagenorhynchus actus* (*actus* means sharp) cutting through the water with clarity and grace. Who wouldn't want that?

The function of dorsal fins for aquatic animals is stability. In water that is always moving, having a dorsal fin provides balance, autonomy, and support for the swift turns you might have to make in this oceanic life. Yes. I need a dorsal fin to navigate all of this transformation.

How did dolphins get dorsal fins anyway? Unlike fish, they don't have bones that support a dorsal fin. The mammals

(p36)

they evolved through and from before returning to the ocean didn't have dorsal fins. They aren't a vestige of limbs like tail flukes and side fins may be. The prevailing explanation is that dolphins evolved the dense tissue that became dorsal fins because they needed to in order to live in the wild movement of the ocean. In other words, dolphins evolved dorsal fins from practice across generations. By accepting that the ocean would always move, and becoming accordingly. An embodied emphasis towards balance. That's what I'm talking about.

In a context that swells and tosses me around, where I might have to pivot without much warning, what are the evolutionary practices that stabilize me and allow me to cut a path through? This is one. Daily writing is my most dependable dorsal practice. It centers me, holds me, gives me perspective on what is changing in the ocean around me. It challenges me to notice my own drift. My daily writing, mirror and sound meditation, and Sharon Bridgforth's oceanic oracle decks extend my reach

towards the ancestors at my back. Familiarize me with a love center I can return to any time. Another stabilizing force is the sound of my dear sister Yashna Maya Padamsee saying, “remember your breath” in the yoga videos that have been opening my shoulders for years. And my newest collective practice, Pilates with the divine Lana Garland is challenging me in ways I didn’t know I needed. I am learning the language of the muscles that would allow me to move from my core. And when we exhale together in a downtown basement in Durham, we sound just like the recordings I listen to of dolphins surfacing and blowing out air.

Yes. I want a dorsal fin. I think I can make one if I practice.

What are your dorsal practices? What evolutionary (p37) repetitions have you cultivated to move through oceans? What are the ones you need to cultivate for the waves moving you now?

I am so grateful for the loving community of divine swimmers who have transformed my tissue by doing their work. I am grateful especially for my dispersed and displaced kindred, for teaching me to find stability in practice when, for our communities, housing and financial stability are often out of reach and capitalism tears our roots up again and again. Out here in the ocean we have our breathing and our practice. We have each other if we choose each other. *Lagenorhynchus actus*, also known as Atlantic white-sided dolphins, love to hang out with fin whales and humpbacks.

How did you do it? It’s almost like you made something out of nothing, body where there was absence, but you didn’t, you made life out of every day. You made it out of infinite love. Thank you for having my back. It still reaches for you. I love you for your breath, your dense, your stubborn growth impossible. Your evolution happening right now.

The bowhead whale lives for centuries and could potentially grow forever. Researchers say their spines don’t set, so even at two hundred years of age they might still grow. Yesterday, through a dear friend, a complete stranger gifted me a whale vertebra that might be from the eternally possible spine of a bowhead whale.

What a heavy piece of oracle. Yes. Honor the bowhead whale whose large proportion of body fat keeps them warm enough in the Arctic to outlive the various weapons used

(p38) to kill them over time. I have said it before, I will say it again, fat is a winning strategy. New research suggests that young bowhead whales may even take nutrients from their bones, to further grow their baleen (the food filters in their mouths) in order to be able to eat more krill, grow more fat, live more better. Evolutionary geniuses.

My own backbone has been teaching me something too. My pediatricians diagnosed me with scoliosis as a school-aged child, and we may never know if I was

born this gorgeously crooked or if the early weight of heavy books caused a shift in how I would carry myself through this life. What we do now? The books certainly were heavy and I haven't yet put them down. And also I walk, sit, and move in the world in a way that overstretches part of me, compresses the other side. My spine shoulders the tense work of keeping me together, keeping me from falling over as I lean through hallways, doors, and other passages.

Some say that the descendants of survivors of the middle passage all have our own version of pelvic and spinal tilt, of makeshift movement, of putting our bodies back together to somehow carry what we should never have had to carry. Some say, at this point in capitalism, we are all bent by the shapes we live through, which are conducive not to life but something else. And the bowhead whales? They saw the boats. Heard those same repurposed boats who came to kill them for their successful blubber, the oil that lit the books of blood and slavery. Even now, it is the commercial pursuit of another form of oil that threatens the bowhead whales whose fat fueled the capitalist project. Bowhead whales have breathed through so much history and outlived it too.

What does it mean, what does it take to grow regardless? Just this year I am learning to retrain my core muscles in a way that gives my back a break from all the breaking it has been doing over decades, using a method developed by an asthmatic athlete named Joseph Pilates, translated by a Black feminist filmmaker named Lana Garland.

In September 2019, along with some folks with endometriosis or who walk with canes or who live with other chronic shapes of tilt and pain, sometimes as a result of trauma, I kyaked for a week. Not straight, but well. And I thought about how between each vertebra there is a story pinched and breathing. And I felt how far I really have to grow. And though I don't have the luxury of centuries, I do have reach. I do have all the way you stretch me. I do have violence to outlive, and ice to break and songs to sing. I do have so much fat to earn and love to offer. Wisdom even. In these bones.

Indus susu and Ganges susu (also know as the two subspecies of the South Asian river dolphin) often swim sideways. Was this always the case? Even in the nineteenth century, when these dolphins swam in large groups, when there were no barges in the rivers, when the water was less polluted? Or is this an adaptation for a time in which they are mostly alone, divided from each other by structures they do not control but must nevertheless navigate? Sometimes they spiral through the water like a drill. They often quickly change directions. And you can see them swimming sideways, one flipper stirring up the sediment to find what they need to feed themselves, echolocating all along.

What about you? Are you swimming sideways? Keeping one ear to
(p39)

the Earth, one to the sky? Are you re-evaluating what you thought progress meant? Are you questioning the directions of your lines? I am. Indus and Ganges susu echolocate all

the time; they are functionally blind and their movements through the river are not about day or night or getting somewhere. Heads bobbing, clicking continuously, they are asking where am I now and now and now? Which is necessary in rivers thick with nets, where your body is prized as bait, and aphrodisiac, and scarce research commodity.

Where are you now and now and now? Navigating planetary and political retrogrades? Do you feel like the world is on its side? Sometimes I do too. And I wonder who decided up and down? And what was I missing when I looked at the world top and bottom like they said? And what do I know about the world? It turns. I turn to you, disoriented. Where are we now?

In some areas, blue whales fast during the day. They eat in the evening and early in the morning. Think of that, the largest animal on the planet, whose stomach holds 2,200 pounds of food, just eating intentionally on the edges of the day. I like to think that we are all living in the long water prayer of the blue whales, that meditative sound that travels hundreds of miles underwater. With one breath they send sound across entire oceans, envelop the planet in far-reaching chant.

M. Nourbese Philip taught me that water holds sound, that it can reverberate on and on and keep on calling us. And so maybe the calls of the great blue whales who filled the whole ocean (before twentieth-century commercial ventures killed 95 percent of them) are still blessing our water selves now. Are still in residence, as Christina Sharpe reminds us. Right now, it is dangerous somehow to be visible in meditation and prayer. Yes. Imagine with me that the biggest sound on the planet, exceeding the anxiety we project over airwaves, is the prayer of blue ancestor depth. What then?

I honor the bravery of everyone fasting. The way you hold
(p40)

multitudes in your all-day-long prayer. And to all of us who could be more intentional about when, how, and what we transmit, about when, how, and what we take in, I send love.