



Low and Slow: Exploring Interspecies Awareness and Embodied Practices Through Freediving

Article, Ella Tetrault



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Published online: August 2021 © CMAJournal

Abstract

In July 2020, I began the process of learning how to free dive as a way to speculate, in practice, what living in an ocean world may mean. Freediving, although referred to in certain contexts as an extreme sport due to the risk of drowning, involves slowing your heart rate by reaching a meditative state with the intention of holding one's breath for long periods underwater.

Originally performed as a ten-minute guided meditation, this text explores my experience learning how to be a free diver. Through auto-theory, the meditation dives into the potential for freediving to be used as a tool for practice-based research and as an embodied, performative practice that can lead to a deeper understanding of the ocean and its inhabitants.

Keywords: Freediving, marine mammals,

For low and slow, I would like to take us on a meditative journey into the world of freediving.

(Chime)

Begin by taking a deep breath, inhaling slowly. Feel the oxygen as it is carried around your body through your bloodstream and reaches every cell.

(Pause)

Fill your diaphragm and then your lungs up all the way. Pause for a second. Exhale low and slow as the carbon dioxide leaves the body.

(Pause)

For the next little while. I would like you to continue this rhythm, feeling the oxygen come in for a count of two and expelling the carbon dioxide for a count of four.

(Pause)

As Alexis Pauline Gumbs says in her naturalist meditation on marine mammals and survival, *Undrowned*, “breath is a practice of presence”(Gumbs 2020, 38).

(Pause)

Gumbs sees our breath as something that unites us with marine mammals and reminds us that we have a lot to learn from their relationship to breathing—both in a world where environmental and political forces make it harder to breathe on land, but also, “in relationship to our intentional living, our mindful relation to each other” (Gumbs 2020, 37).

(Pause)

For the next little while, I would like you to continue this rhythmic breathing alone, but together—oxygen in for two and carbon dioxide out for four.

(Pause)

As you listen to the sound of my voice, we are beginning a process that free divers refer to as a “breathe-up.” In the words of the International Association for the Development of Apnea

(AIDA), “you are preparing for a breath hold by doing less and less, until you do nothing at all anymore” (Christen 2015, 21).

(Pause)

This simple process of breathing-up helps you slow your heart rate to achieve a longer breath hold on land or in water. Or, as Melody Jue in *Wild Blue Media* poses, helps us to develop an amphibious perspective—a slow exchange of terrestrial for aquatic mobility (Jue 2020, 37). Jue sees diving as an interface, which, “unlike screens and keyboards...extends from the lungs into body tissues as they absorb extra air” (Jue 2020, 35).

(Pause)

Or, as Rachel Carson so eloquently wrote, “to sense this world of waters known to the creatures of the sea we must shed our human perceptions of length and breadth and time and place” (Carson 1937, 55-6).

(Pause)

A grown harbour seal can stay underwater for as long as thirty minutes and can slow her heart rate down from 120 beats a minute, to three, or four (Gumbs 2020, 225). This is not so different from some competitive free divers who have reported heart rates as low as 7 beats per minute (Nestor 2014, 118). Competitive free diver Natalia Molchanova holds the female record for the longest static apnea hold of nine minutes and two seconds (Skolik 2015).

(Pause)

On your next exhale, think of the Weddell Seal, who, when born, does not realize her diving capacities. By the time she has finished nursing, her mother will force her head below the surface until she dives 2,500 feet below—where she could stay for an hour if she chooses (Gumbs 2020, 41).

(Pause)

A low and slow breath-up not only helps you to clear your mind but will also help you focus on what's really important. As the AIDA freediving manual says, “letting go, (and) becoming absolutely silent and focused on the moment” (Christen 2015, 21), will assist you in creating the perfect conditions for a successful dive. es“.Or, as Gumbs hopes, “May our breathing open up to the possibility of peace” (Gumbs 2020, 38).

(Pause)

You may notice that, with relatively little effort, you have created a very nice feeling of stillness. Even though you have been reading a text on your screen, you have achieved this quite easily.

(Pause)

You can stop counting your breath now. Perhaps, as Gumbs suggests, you have slowed down enough to deepen into trust (Gumbs 2020, 38).

(Pause)

Now, create a tranquil and clear setting in a calm place in the ocean. Place yourself floating and bobbing at the horizon line as water gently splashes your face. Imagine that you are upright and wearing flippers. A weight belt and a wetsuit keep you comfortably buoyant with minimal effort. See the yellow safety float as it bobs gently with a long yellow rope descending straight down into the water. Notice a harbour seal bobbing curiously and looking at you from a distance.

(Pause)

In a few moments, it will be your turn to dive. You will go inward, both physically and mentally, as you calmly work your way down to new depths.

(Pause)

This theoretical plunge into the nocean will help us to envision on land, on our computers, the beauty of experiencing the master switch of life: this term was coined by Per Scholander in 1963 to describe the phenomena in vertebrate animals of the, “physiological reflexes in the brain, lungs, and heart, among other organs, that are triggered the second we put our faces in the water. The deeper we dive, the more pronounced the reflexes become... turning us into efficient deep-sea-diving animals” (Nestor 2014, 80).

(Pause)

This master-switch is otherwise known by a more common expression as the *mammalian diving reflex*. It can lead us to an embodied understanding of the ocean and its inhabitants, which for many free divers, including myself, represents a very deep and very powerful desire.

(Pause)

But for now, on your next exhale, let us remain on the surface.

(Pause)

In *Surface Encounters*, post-humanist scholar Ron Broglio attempts to carve out what an animal phenomenology may mean. He argues that we have made assumptions that animals have no ability to reflect critically and lack the depth of memory. Or, in Georges Bataille’s words, the world of animals is “like water in water” (Bataille in Broglio 2011, xvi). Broglio thinks we have, “cornered the animals by limiting their sense of depth” (Broglio 2011, xvi).

(Pause)

Ah, but here we are caught in a surface and depth binary once again. As Jue explains, pressure and saturation are factors often neglected when speaking about the ocean. By immersing ourselves, instead of standing on the surface, gazing into the depth, these factors come to matter and assist us in developing, “milieu-specific environments of critical practice that differentially implicate the human observer and their normative orientations” (Jue 2020, 57).

(Pause)

Imagine yourself turning facedown, lying flat, and looking into the water. When you're ready, take your last breath through your snorkel (breath) then duck-dive into the water. Turn toward the rope and pinch your nose to hear a light squeezing sound as the first bit of pressure releases.

(Pause)

Begin to pull yourself gently down as calmly as you possibly can. Relax, because as Gumbs says, “the pressure is coming” (Gumbs 2020, 225).

(Pause)

Although competitive freediving is seen as an extreme sport by some, the process of freediving is also a slow process where one is attempting to make gradual physiological changes that have tested the limits of a human body to adapt to a water world.

(Pause)

As you imagine yourself climbing down the rope, think of the Ama—an ancient culture of Japanese diving women that dates back to 500 BC. yFor the Ama, freediving is both a tool to gather food on the ocean floor and a spiritual practice; they were capable of diving up to 150 feet and staying down for more than three minutes. Passed down from mother to daughter, they saw themselves not as visitors to the ocean but as a part of it. As one Ama wrote, “[Underwater] I hear the water coming into my body, I hear the sunlight penetrating the water” (Nestor 2014, 80).

(Pause)

Allow yourself to let go of the rope.

(Pause)

Do you feel vulnerable here?

(Pause)

Assuming you are diving within your limits, keep going.

(Pause)

At around 60 feet, in the words of journalist and free diver James Nestor, “we are not quite ourselves” (Nestor 2014, 80). Your heart will be beating at half of its normal rate and blood will rush from your extremities. Your lungs will shrink to a third of their normal size and your senses will numb.

(Pause)

Congratulations, you have reached an ocean depth of 100 feet. Perhaps begin to think of yourself, as what Gumbs refers to, as a “depth mammal” (Gumbs 2020, 191).

(Pause)

Ocean activist and scuba diver Sylvia Earle lived in at depth laboratory at 50 feet underwater where she spent 336 hours of time between 20 to 100 feet, thus allowing her to get to know the fish whose, “habits become as familiar as those of neighbors” (Earle in June 2020, 60). For this

privilege, which she refers to as an “extended passport” in the ocean, she spent twenty-one hours decompressing at the surface in a special diving bell.

(Pause)

Imagine sinking down to 300 feet where the pressure is nine times what it was on the surface. This far down, your heart beats at a quarter of its normal rate—slower than a person in a coma. Your senses begin to disappear, and you have likely already enter into a dream state (Nestor 2014, 91).

(Pause)

Not too far ahead of you now, you hear (or feel) a clicking noise. You turn your head to see a huge, oval, and dark shape floating in the water.

(Pause)

Let her come a little closer to you. As she approaches, you begin to feel her vibrating through your body.

(Pause)

Can you guess who she is?

(Pause)

You have been visited by a sperm whale, the largest predator in the ocean. The whale in Herman Melville’s classic tale, *Moby Dick*.

(Pause)

Sperm whales, like dolphins, have the ability to echolocate. She sends out a clicking noise and feels an echo in a fatty sac beneath her jaw, which, unlike our two directional ears, has thousands of data points that can, “gauge the distance, shape, depth, interior, and exterior of the objects and creatures around it” (Nestor 2014, 91). Although she is characterized by a narrative of sharp teeth and fierce ocean behaviour, scientists now believe that her teeth are not used to chew; instead, to attune her echolocation (Gumbs 2020, 195).

(Pause)

Researcher and free diver Fabrice Schnöller, founder of Darewin, has collected the largest database of sperm whale behavioural and vocalization data which, among other things, has worked to expose how little we know of whale communication. Schnöller believes that because sperm whales communicate with sonar, a sensory system we do not possess, we simply do not, “get it” (Nestor 2014, 91).

(Pause)

All toothed whales (dolphins, porpoises, river dolphins, killer whales, and sperm whales) can echolocate. This is a practice that, as Gumbs describes, has the capacity to change our understanding of “vision” and “visionary action” (Gumbs 2020, 27).

(Pause)

We are almost at the end of our breath hold.

(Pause)

Grab hold of the rope, turn, and begin to kick. No need to relieve the pressure on the ascent. Move quickly, but intentionally.

(Pause).

We have once again reached 16 feet. Our safety diver has come to meet us, and in just a few moments, we will break the surface of the water where, in our first breath after several minutes, we will expel the carbon dioxide from our bodies.

(Pause).

As we surface, let's reflect on Lori Gruen's concept of entangled empathy, which she describes as a form of moral attention that cannot be separated from an embodied, emotional experience. She sees entangled empathy as a way to reflect on "proximity and distance" (Gruen 2015, 34) with other species that she believes can help us work through the complicated relationships we have with animals.

(Pause)

You are finally back on the surface. Imagine you are taking three sharp hook breaths (three breaths). You are acclimatizing back to the terrestrial world after conditionally belonging to an ocean world because of a brief "extended passport" (Earle in Jue 2020, 60). Your safety diver will be watching you. Let them know you are okay.

(Chime)

It is my hope that each time you imagine this dive, you become more finely attuned with the world as an ocean world, hopefully establishing a deeper, more porous connection between your own lungs, and what Earle refers to as "the blue lungs of the planet" (Earle in Jue 2020, 67), as you gain both physiological and theoretical capacities for an embodied human-ocean and human-marine mammal encounter.

(Pause).

Find yourself floating in the water once again. In the distance, you see the same harbour seal watching you... Perhaps you feel a special kinship with this (fellow) marine mammal.

(Pause).

Take a deep breath.

About the Author

Ella Tetrault is a Nova-Scotian born artist. She holds an MFA in Public Art and New Artistic Strategies from the Bauhaus University (2011-2013) and a BA from the University of Toronto (2003-2008). She is co-founder and co-curator of the Fuller Terrace Lecture Series and founder of Miracle Baby Gallery in Oakwood Village, Toronto. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Visual Art at York University, a guest lecturer at the University of Cologne at the Institute for Art and Art Theory alongside Stefanie Busch, and a sessional lecturer at the University of Toronto. She has exhibited in Canada, the United States, Poland, Greece, The UK, and Germany. She can hold her breath underwater for two minutes and sixteen seconds.