

**A dolphin discovery community:  
Building connectedness with self, others  
and the world.**

**18-10-2005**

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## Background

The dolphin discovery centre is located in Bunbury, capital of the south west region, 240 kms south of Perth. The centre is the only site in Australia which offers on shore and off shore interaction opportunities with wild dolphins. This centre is the focus of an unintentional community of tourists, volunteers, locals, students, research personnel, therapists, children and adults seeking healing who have in common an interest in experiencing the friendly bottlenose wild dolphins for which this location has developed a reputation. The population of this community comprises a large number of transients particularly overseas tourists (40,000 per year) and Australian tourists (20,000 per year). The volunteer population (averaging 100 per year) assists in the management of the community interactions with dolphins, beach patrol work and research.(Phil Coulthard, Interview 7/4/2005). This population comprises long term volunteers of several years who are locals, as well as international volunteers particularly from Europe and Japan who stay for months. There are shared houses where international volunteers often live together. Some of the international volunteers are also students completing work study projects on dolphins. A Marine biologist, Phil Coulthard has been appointed for the last 7 years to head research on the habits of dolphins visiting this beach. In addition, a therapy group is an active part of the dolphin discovery community and comprises, the founding therapist, a German woman, Carla Henco, other therapists and members of the families of children, adolescents and adults suffering from illness or developmental delays who are seeking healing from contact with the dolphins. The therapy group members are a mix of international and local Australians with a high proportion from Germany.

The dolphin discovery community today form a sustainable regional ecotourism centre meeting the Ecotourism society's criteria (Honey, 1999: 22-23). There is a strong commitment to conserve the natural resource which is primarily the dolphins by managing interactions so as to minimise the impact of human beings on these wild mammals. This includes controlled interaction zones, limits on swimming with dolphins unless offshore on managed boat tours. They have avoided the criticisms of dolphin centres based on captive dolphins which extensive research shows reduce dolphin life from 30 years to 5.3 years on average.( Johnson: 1990, Pearson, 2001). The centre's feeding of fish to the dolphins is less than 3-4% of their diet to ensure dolphins do not become dependent or overly socialised and fail to teach their offspring how to fish as happened at the Monkey Mia centre. There is an

extensive education section involving displays, videos and information stands. Education occurs at the Discovery room, the interaction zone and the swim with dolphin tours. Proceeds from tourists and the shop fund research projects and education projects.

([www.dolphindiscovery.com.au](http://www.dolphindiscovery.com.au))

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the Dolphin discovery community members' experiences of reconnecting with self and others, awakened by contact with the dolphins. It illustrates how people experience encounters with dolphins as connecting them to themselves, each other and the world. It is essentially a study in the psychosocial processes of rebuilding connectedness, that can be described metaphorically as the tapestry of community. Core to this process is the overcoming of dualism within self and between each other. Fox (1990:86) defines dualism a way of seeing life in terms of either/or, them/us, black/white, good/bad, and suggests what is required to heal individual and communities and to re-establish connectedness is dialectical thinking which embraces both aspects in ourselves and others and creates connectedness, the fibre of community. We move from the dualistic them versus us to them and us. Ornstein, cited in Fox (1990:86) goes on to call for a consciousness of connectedness positing that it begins with the individual reconnecting right and left lobes qualities of the brain, integrating them as partners in a human dance so that there is relationship between thinking and feeling, the active and receptive, the intellectual and the sensuous, the mechanistic and the organic, the analytic and the synthetic. In addition, as Peck points out (1990: 57) the re-establishment of connectedness comes not from the ethic of rugged individualism and the pretence that all is well but from the recognition that we are wounded, vulnerable and interdependent with each other and the human kingdom. It is through our connectedness that we experience real human psycho-social health and validity. In Buddhism, a hallmark of our humanity is our capacity to show joy in another's joy, sorrow at another's sorrow know as *mudita* (Macey, 1991). This quality of community is core to Scott Peck's definition of community: "to rejoice together, mourn together, and delight in each other." (1990:59). This paper articulates the experiences of persons encountering dolphins and illustrates how this encounter rebuilds connectedness within the individual, between persons and weaves community.

To date, research in dolphin-human interaction has focused either on empirical studies of dolphins such as communication patterns (Dunn and Goldsworthy, 2000), brain patterns

(Grof, 1985), interactive patterns based on brain wave responses (De Bergerac, 1998:108), pod sizes and movements, feeding patterns, and mating patterns. There has also been research on the therapeutic effects on children with developmental disabilities or adults with illnesses. Hare (1998) documents the developmental progress of child exposed to Dolphins, and Nathanson, (1978) their use as a reinforcer in behaviour modification programs. Mc Kinney et al (2001) cites research that has found that dolphin assisted therapy reduces stress, alleviates depression, boosts production of T-cells and antibodies and hence enhances recovery. There is much controversy in research between those who attribute changes to the joy and delight that comes with recreational experiences with dolphins versus those who attribute changes to the healing powers of dolphins themselves (McKinney, Dustin, Wolff, 2001). This research focuses on the psycho-social dimension of recreating connectedness with self and others that is reported by tourists, therapists, and families in therapy, volunteers, researchers and management who have had contact with dolphins. A rich profile of the renewal of connectedness arising from experiences with Dolphins is explicated in this research endeavour.

## **Methodology**

Phenomenology was chosen as the most appropriate method for explicating the participant's experience of connectedness in relation to being in a community focused upon contact with dolphins. Husserl (1970/1900) describes phenomenology as a method for going "back to the things themselves", their essential nature. In this case, we are investigating persons experience of Dolphins in creating connectedness within self, others and community building. There were 20 participants in the sample. Of the twenty participants five were tourists, five were involved in therapy, five were volunteers, two were involved in the research program, one was a student on a study program and one person was in management. This gives a very good cross section of the different focuses of interests in those persons participating in the dolphin discovery community. Of the 20 participants interviewed, 14 were Australian and 6 were from overseas. Two of the overseas participants were from Germany and involved in the therapy program and four were tourists from England. Half of the sample were male and half were female. Half of the sample were from white collar occupations. Seventeen of the participants were over 35, with the remaining three participants in their early thirties. The participants in the survey were present in the dolphin community for some period of time between October 2004 and March 2005.

In depth interviews were conducted with each participant asking them to recount their experiences of being in community with the dolphins as the focus of their experience. Ascribing to the phenomenological method applied by Giorgi (1985), the meaning structures of the client's experience were explicated. The explication process involves five stages.

*Stage 1. Intuitive/holistic understanding of the raw data*

The first stage involved reading the transcribed interviews repeatedly if necessary, to achieve a holistic and intuitive understanding of the meanings attributed to the phenomena. .

*Stage 2. Forming a constituent profile*

This stage involved the construction of a constituent profile, which summarises the raw data from each participant. A set of natural meaning units, or NMU's, are extracted which are self-definable, discrete segments of expression of individual aspects of the participant's experience. The purpose expressed in each of the extracted NMU's is reduced to central themes. Central themes express the meaning concisely, whilst maintaining the original mode of expression. Finally, central themes that are repeated are distilled to a single theme. Central themes are then re-ordered, and the subsequent reconstituted list of central themes provides a non-repetitive list of descriptive meaning statements for each participant, which is termed the constituent profile.

*Stage 3. Forming a thematic index*

Constituent profiles of each participant are used as a basis to construct a 'thematic index', which highlights major themes that have emerged. The 'thematic index' enables the data to be moved from being examined at an idiographic (individual) level to a nomothetic (group) level . The thematic index establishes a non-repetitive, sequenced list of meaning statements used to search for interpretative themes.

*Stage 4. Searching the thematic index*

Interpretative themes are statements that succinctly capture the meanings portrayed through the constituent profiles. The constituent profiles and central themes are searched to explicate interpretative themes, which enable the formation of the extended description which describes the essence of the phenomena.

*Stage 5. Extended description*

This is a summary of the interpretative themes to produce an in-depth picture of clients' experience of the counselling process.

***The experience of reconnectedness***

The following seven interpretative themes reflect the essential nature of the experience of connectedness in community emerging from contact with dolphins. The experience of connectedness embraces being in relationship with self, being in relationship with others, being in relationship with the community.

*1. Persons experience healing in their bodies as a result of being close to dolphins and feeling renewed vitality and health in their lives.*

A range of healing experiences were identified by persons after contact with dolphins. The first included persons reconnecting with their healing potential so they could move to a fuller sense of themselves. This is well illustrated by Hannah who talks about her contact with the dolphins as a healing journey with the dolphins. She experiences them as welcoming her to the dolphin family and reconnecting her to her true self and creating the possibilities for healing in herself:

.. I felt them scanning me like a barcode in a supermarket... I could say they have activated my DNA. It was about being who I really am...it is healing... it is about surrendering to the waves...

In the surrendering to the waves of energy Hannah opens to the healing waves from the dolphin that take her beyond herself and connect her to a wider community of possibilities. Core to the healing dimension is the capacity to reconnect to one's love for self and others which persons express arising in their contact with dolphins. This releases what they experience as the capacity for wellbeing. Hendra talks about this healing she experienced with the dolphins resulting from what she described as the love connection:

The dolphins helped to open my heart... I felt unconditional love and it makes me feel better. I fixed my diabetes and overweight problems... I lost 27 kilos... I feel good now.

There are those persons who reported that the healing results from the calmness and relaxation that comes from encountering the dolphins. There has been much research done on this aspect in relation to autistic children (Hyson, 2005). Rhonda recounts how her autistic son has responded to being with dolphins:

For the first time in 12 years he actually sleeps after spending time with the dolphins... he goes from tense to limp after being with the dolphins and when he goes home he is more relaxed. He changes from grumpy to more peaceful... a huge change... it takes the pressure off me...

Whatever the physical condition the experiences of healing with dolphins are described produce a greater comfort of being in the body, rather than the aggravations of impaired physical functioning. It is as though there is a repaired connection between body and person inhabiting that body which restores a calm space for self and for reaching out to other people.

*2. Persons experience a movement from sadness and heaviness of feeling to joyfulness and lightness of feeling which enables them to reach out to other persons with warmth and happiness*

Recurrently participants describe their encounter with dolphins as touching deep emotions of joy and love which enables them to go past the depression or grief and loss that is stifling their lives. De Bergerac (1998) reports similar findings with her client groups and describes this experience as getting in touch with “the dolphin within” because she sees dolphins as reconnecting persons with their capacity for joy, fun, laughter and unconditional love.

Mathew captures his experience of opening up to love and joy:

When you get this dolphin look it takes place... the excitement level in your body goes straight through the roof... your energy level is enhanced... your heart chakra is opened up and the cares of the world just fade away.. The dolphins are a key to help us lighten up

The reconnection with ones joy and happiness has also been described by a participant as follows:

I have a good connection with this dolphin. I received a lot of energy from her echo-locating and this felt like waves of energy flowing over me... following this I felt a lot of lightness and joy

Petrina describes deeply the waves of joy and laughter touching participants and connecting persons to each other in the dolphin interactive zone on the beach

...following this (dolphin connection) I felt lightness and joy... there was a huge amount of good energy on the beach with the dolphins... people seemed happy and talkative and sharing with raised voices about their experiences. I noticed people being happy and laughing... even an hour after the experience I still felt joyful and energised...

It is at these moments of shared experience with dolphins that the strangers of this transient gathering begin to connect with each other as a community of celebration. This is a community of those who have shared a transformative moment in their individual lives. They spontaneously engage in conversations with each other, talk with animation and enthusiasm.

Depression experienced as disconnectedness from self and others is also cited by respondents as lifting with contact with dolphins. Andy describes how with dolphins your “problems melt away, depression lifts and you feel happiness and calmness”. Another person recounted how his sense of depression lifted and he felt better able to handle the problems in their life. A volunteer recounts his experience of witnessing such a change:

A man came along and he seemed very depressed with his head bowed down to the ground. He went into the water with the dolphins. When he came out he said: I came down here very depressed and now I am going to face what I need to

De Bergerac (1998) also reported that participants in her dolphin healing encounters reported greater feelings of joy, happiness and seemed more able to overcome problems and feelings of sadness and loss.

*3. Persons experience a greater sense of relaxedness after contact with dolphins which gives them a greater sense of calmness and peacefulness.*

Participants describe this sense of calmness as a pervasive feeling of relaxedness, a flowing energy through their bodies and restoring rhythmical breathing pattern. The sense of calmness is described as pervading their body. Barbara captures the relaxedness that followed being with the dolphins: “I felt really relaxed and just let it happen. It was surreal and I felt it everywhere in my body. I felt that I was suspended in time while they glided by...” Other descriptors of the experience include the sense of “my cares drifting away”, “realising what is important in my life and letting go”. The experience post the dolphin encounter of the



calmness, involves the commitment to be more present to ones self, to live more in the present moment and be more available for quality human interactions.

*4. Persons experience a sense of excitement when being in the presence of dolphins that gives them renewed energy in their relationships with other persons.*

Alex describes his experience of the impact the presence of the dolphins on the community as one of “exhilarating energy”. The dolphins created excitement as people focused on the dolphins and the level of excitement spread among the people and brought more and more dolphins in and increased the level of stimulating communication between people on the beach. People were flowing over with excitement, bubbling and chatting to each other excitedly.

One of the dolphin swim tour persons describes his experience of observing many people swimming with the dolphins and identifies excitement and calm joy as the single greatest thing people experience in contacting the dolphins. He observes that in his experience this energy connects people to the dolphins and to each other as they delight in talking about their experiences:

When I see people coming out of the water they can't get rid of the smile. They are very excited, not over excited. We don't see people jumping backwards but they are very pleased ...I think they enjoy it even more when they return from the trip and discuss how they interact with the animal.

De Bergerac (1998) observes a similar experience of joy among her participants and she describes this as the Dolphin smile.

*5. Children experience the ability to move better and communicate with other persons after contact with dolphins*

One of the volunteers recounts her experience of observing such a recovery in child from overseas who was visiting the centre:

She was a little hunched up child who breathed and could only hum she had to be fed through a tube. It was believed she could see...the first day the dolphin actually brushed her leg and after a few days a dolphin came up and echo located her and her dad. ..Afterwards she was screaming. Her mum was excited because she was making

noises... Her mum and dad were in raptures as she began expressing herself to the world. This child opened up completely from being this ball into a completely open child who would stretch out her limbs

Another volunteer describes the sense of connectedness and joy he experienced as part of the dolphin healing program with a group of 6-8 year olds dying of cancer:

Their last wish was to be with dolphins. I took them out and laid them on top of my arm and the dolphins make a fuss of them. They had a smile on their face. That really affected me as well

One visitor describes the visit of her autistic child as opening up his ability to communicate, to understand more words, and to make changes in behaviour after being with the dolphins even after everyone else has given up on him. She emphasised the opportunity it gives him to be part of a community:

This is good for him to come out, the outdoor experience, the water all the people. It is to be with people ... in the group if there are no dolphins we walk along the beach and they take him into the water and move him...dancing, singing, mainly relaxation, joyfulness, pleasure. I think their main goal is to get him to laugh or smile or feel they have reached him in some way that is positive.

A teacher who has brought children down to be with dolphins over many years described the changes as greater connectedness with people:

Many people here come from overseas and use nonverbal communication that certainly suits our students. It helps to keep them focused and engaged and gain great benefit from it... they children are easier to work with at school... had more eye contact and attention when they came back...

Carla, co-coordinator of much of the dolphin therapy experiences closely the children changing through contact with Dolphins and emphasizes that often it is only after dolphin encounters that many autistic children make eye contact, or reach out to communicate and connect with another human being. She has also experienced children who are developmentally delayed start to recover over weeks of being with dolphins. She describes a

case of a child 6 years behind the norm with impaired hearing and eyesight, who could not walk, talk or swallow food.

After the fourth week he started to make some sounds. He got excited. He is able to interact with other people and is more social. He was always crying before. He now laughs a lot and seems happy. His speech is developing and his walking is getting better. He is becoming more and more sociable. He now tells his mother that he loves her and gives her a kiss...

There is wealth of research on dolphin therapy with developmentally delayed children (Byrd, 1991, Cochrane and Callen, 1992; Nathanson, 1998). All indicate the increased capacity of the child to access his own sensory experiences after contact with dolphins and then to communicate to others.

*6. Persons experience a feeling of unconditional love when in contact with dolphins which opens their heart to all beings and to relationship with all life.*

A recurrent experience emphasized by participants was the meeting with dolphins that opened the heart to connectedness with all beings, so one could experience deeply being part of community of life that embraces human and non-human beings. This is a concept that Arne Naess (1995:14) has described as the “ecological self.” This is the connected alive self in relationship to all other beings, beyond the notion of the traditional closed self. It is described by participants as the capacity to see ourselves in others, in all living beings. The future of the planet depends on this capacity to be in community of all beings. Maria describes this experience succinctly...

When I first went into the water with the dolphins I felt their sonar very strongly like a big energy towards me. I started crying. It was really wonderful...it opened a new door, my heart.. It showed it was creation.. That was something I had always been looking for... to feel a link between all beings.. The dolphins gave so much love and friendship... you feel so closely linked... you have to return to the source of all life.

Persons of all colours, races, creeds and socio-economic statuses come to the dolphin interaction zone. Central to the experience with dolphins was the opening of their hearts to unconditional love which embraces themselves and those around them and described by respondents in a variety of ways.

Love is a very intense wave... it goes so deeply... Love is the key that unlocks everything, dolphins teach us about love, unconditional love.” The love is so strong with them... they have helped me be 100% connected on the earth.

Hannah describes this sense the connectedness arising from the experience of unconditional love from the dolphins as trust restoring and “ it really opens up your heart charkra so you can relate and easily open you heart and use it for all situations”. Core to rebuilding community is the sense of inclusivity which Peck (1987:61) emphasizes. The experience of inclusivity with its dimensions of acceptance, embracing difference, celebration of diversity are repeated by several participants after encountering dolphins.

*7. Persons experience a sense of deep wisdom when being looked at by dolphins and feeling of a new connection to all persons.*

Finally, there is the deep experience of being in communion with one’s deepest wisdom that arises from contact with the dolphins, often recounted after participants have experienced being looked in the eye by the dolphins. Matthew describes this profound sense of wisdom and connectedness after many experiences of swimming with dolphins and deeply connecting with them as beings of wisdom:

Personally I have felt brand new again, unscathed, unmarked straight from the spirit but at the same time being newly connected to all things, all knowing... if you wanted to know you could just know

There is also the sense shared by some participants as partaking in a greater wisdom than themselves which gives them great insight .Violet described the experience of dolphins reconnecting her to her mother after she had died. A dolphin came up to here and “ It was telling me that basically my mother was alright and where she had gone to. It was like the dolphin was pointing out where she was...”

Hyson, ( 2005) in his research on dolphin intelligence concludes that cetacea (dolphins and whales) are very self-aware, fully conscious, have complex language and because they larger brains, more available cortex and more processing power, they are overall more intelligent than human beings. Other writers such a De Bergerac( 1998:118-119) cite participants as experiencing this higher state of wisdom which they identify this state as a state of unity, of

knowingness. This is achieved through dolphin contact as though dolphins provide a “doorway” to this state of ultimate connectedness.

## **Extended description**

At the heart of the experience of interacting with dolphins is the capacity to reconnect with yourself, others and the community in a meaningful and flourishing way. Alex a volunteer captures this:

Personally the interaction has impacted on me immensely. It has given me a lot of calmness and patience. It has opened me up to a lot of things. I have more patience with people. I look at things more deeply now. Because of this experience I find I can love things more deeply now. .I can see that people come from different parts of the world and I see that we can communicate easily. We can look at each other in the eyes and know how we feel. Regardless of culture and background we can really accept each other. It can help us to become more tolerant. ..Once you have time to consider the other person you become more tolerant.

It seems that the experience of interacting with dolphins provides a conduit for accessing healing for the body, for repairing developmental delays particularly in gesture and speech so that new routes for communication with self and others are available, to creating a calmness resulting from being present in the present moment, for expanding the mind with new insights and wisdom that create bonds of understanding to other beings, and to opening the heart to love for self and others with a new sense of joy and delight in life. The dolphins become powerful catalysts for human reconnectedness with self and with each other, the cornerstones of vibrant community.

## **Conclusion**

De Bergerac(1998) in her research on psycho-social changes in persons contacting dolphins on the east coast of Australia identified ten key patterns of change, of which seven were also identified by this client sample. These included relief of stress and fast tracking learning of new skills, freedom from grief, depression and physical pain. It also included freedom to access more fully ones creative potential; to experience unconditional love and to connect with the transpersonal. Substantially more experientially based research with dolphin-human

interactions is essential to elucidate further this profoundly personally and socially transformative relationship.

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