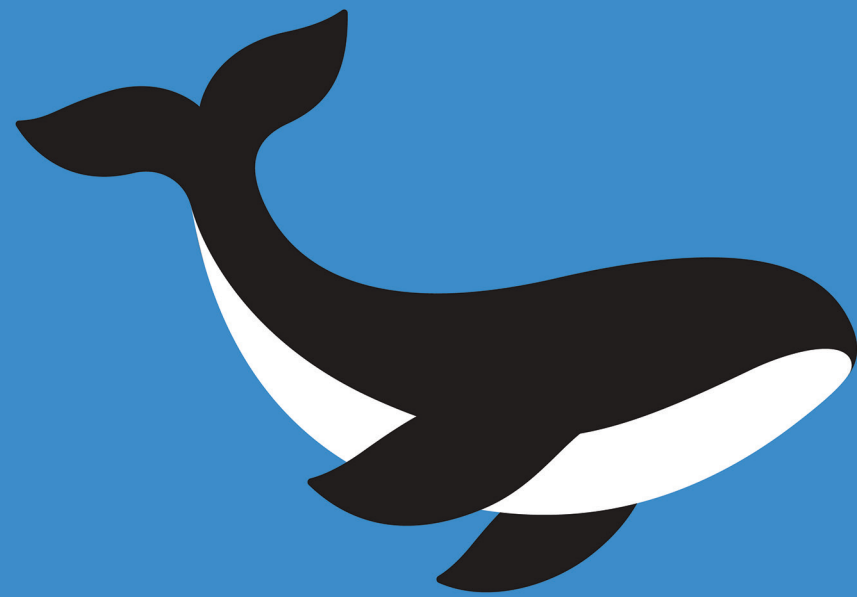


Lessons from the Orcas



by
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Anthony Rempel was an educator and school leader in the Kamloops/Thompson school district for 28 years. Recently retired, Anthony is sharing some of his experiences with colleagues who are just setting out, and those who have been in schools for many years. He is currently writing a book to share some of the lessons he's learned through informal stories, like this one.

Recently, my wife and I went on a trip to northern Vancouver Island, where we spent a few days on a remote island. Orcas have been visiting this location for years, attracted by the smooth pebbles of the beach on its northern shore and engaging in an activity known as 'rubbing'. The orcas move their bodies against the pebbles on the beach, often rolling upside down as they rub along. Each day on this island, we invested several hours beachcombing and waiting for the magical moment when the resident orcas would appear. On our final day on the island, we were told that the whales had been spotted just a few kilometres away.

We packed a lunch and hunkered down, enjoying the warm sunshine, cool breeze, and gorgeous surroundings. The first three hours were glorious and relaxing, but then – as is frequent in this region – the weather began to shift. The wind picked up, and we felt a few drops of rain on our shoulders. Swiftly, a full-blown squall arrived, and we were compelled to take cover under the giant Sitka spruce trees, amidst the dense salal bushes. We hung in for a half hour, as

the rain continued to pound down. I was reluctant to leave, knowing that it would be some time before we would return to this island, but the grind of the wait and the uncertainty of a favourable outcome won out.

The next morning, over breakfast at the local cafe, we overheard someone mention that the orcas had appeared for an 'epic rub' about 90 minutes after we had left the beach. I wished I had not heard that, as we had accepted the likelihood that the orcas had not arrived that day. Knowing we had missed something so special felt incredibly deflating, and it took several days to get past the disappointment and regret.

I suspect that most people can identify with that feeling, the desire for a 'redo', the opportunity for a different choice. As the old saying goes, "Hindsight is always 20/20"; I don't get to relive that moment where I could decide to hang in there. Instead, I get the opportunity to reflect on the experience, and think about what I might have learned from it.

Had I not overheard the conversation in the restaurant, I would not be writing this story. Life is full of moments where we never find out what we might have missed, and that's okay. As a school Principal, I knew that there were many special breakthrough moments occurring over the course of each day. I was not able to witness each one, yet it filled me with joy to hear about these moments from teachers and students. When I was invited to classrooms to witness or take part in special lessons or celebrations, I would find a way to make it happen. With the orcas, a lack of patience and unwillingness to sacrifice my own comfort caused me to miss out on something truly special.

The other lesson I learned was the importance of patience and perseverance. When we arrived on the island, we were told the best chance of spotting these whales was to put in the time. There was no guarantee they would appear, but it required faith in the process.

As a Principal, I had to have faith in the vision that was established for the school. In a results-oriented world, it's easy to get discouraged and abandon a course you believe in when there is pressure to produce strong data and adopt new research-based strategies touted as the best way to engage learners and improve your school results. In the first year at my most recent school, a group of teachers and I attended an inspirational conference, and the enthusiasm for this new vision and the commitment from staff was contagious. Through my five years at the school, we stayed the course and continued to build on this vision despite pressures from many quarters to shift our focus to different initiatives. This was not a 'performance-based' vision, but rather one that was built on meaningful learning and thinking. In their book, *Ten Mindframes for Leaders*, John Hattie and Raymond Smith write that, "All performance is threatened by the possibility of failure. Teachers and students are not meant to perform." I like that quote for its authenticity and encouragement of faith in the process of persevering with a powerful, practical vision.

I had faith in the vision and the process of our school's vision for learning, and because my faith didn't waiver, it gave the teachers confidence that we were doing the right thing. Over time, we saw some wonderful results, even if they weren't clearly visible in the district assessment data.

That brings me back to the orcas.

I can be philosophical, and believe that we did our best to be there for the magical rubbing event. But the truth is, we aborted the mission even after one of the locals encouraged us to stick around. Sometimes you have to put your own impatience and skepticism aside, and put your trust in someone who has been there and has the experience. In that instance, we made a decision that we later regretted. Next time, we will be prepared to go the distance.