

Leviathan

Third Place, Toastmasters District Speech Contest: This is a speech whose message challenges the audience while aiming at their hearts and minds. In a way, it's a book report - a powerful speech inspired by a book.

A speech by Jock Elliott - www.jockelliott.com.au (July 1979)

There are many hells on this earth, where the black and bloody soul of man spills out his hatred and his greed. Where death, like a fog, fills a man's mouth with its foul taste.

There is one particular hell. It is the flensing deck of a whaling mother ship. And what blasphemy is that, to link in one breath the word 'mother' with this vile and shameful place.

A sweeping stretch of cold, grey steel, piled high with the massive bloated bodies of fin whale, sperm whale and humpback. Tumbled mountains of entrails, hearts and lungs, bones and baleen, and calves in embryo. A cold inferno.

And a creeping, sluggish gelid river of blood flows down the sloping deck and into the sea. The sea, the cradle of life, the womb of this earth, takes back the blood of its children.

And its children are legion. No words can tell of the teeming life of the sea. Salmon and shrimp, shark and octopus. And things from the endless deep, like nightmares. Some hunting, some hunted.

And of all these creatures, the greatest by far, and yet the least in numbers, is the great blue whale, Leviathan.

At his birth he measured twenty feet from his gently smiling mouth to the great flukes of his tail. But he took the rich milk from his mother, two hundred gallons a day, and every hour he weighed ten pounds more.

And with the passing of the years he reached his prime so that today he is 120 feet long. He weighs as much as eleven hundred men. His tongue is the size of a car and twice as heavy. His heart is the size of a horse, and his brain is larger than ours.

And he lives all his life beneath the sea, in an endless, tranquil blackness. In a still, weightless, eternal night, his great bulk knowing no constraints as he swims beside his bride; frisking a slow frisk; or making awkward, blind, and happy love. Or singing songs - if you could hear them - of sad beauty. Of long, slow, basso-profundo sounds, with here and there a high tenor note, or even a silver soprano.

Songs without words, perhaps without meaning; but songs without hatred, or malice or fear.

Through all the year, he plays and sings and swims in his slow and placid way through all the oceans of the world. From the warm waters of the equator in winter, and then in summer to the cold reaches of the Great Southern Ocean, which beats against the ice bound coast of Antarctica, there - to eat the plankton which turns the sea yellow, which is the beginning of the food chain in the sea.

But there too he becomes in his turn, the end of the food chain. For it has been decided that Leviathan shall not live, but that he shall be sacrificed to satisfy the greed of men.

For following him from the north and flying flags which bear the symbols of hammer and sickle, and risen sun, come black hulled ships, crewed by grim, black-hearted men, whose task it is to kill Leviathan and all his kin and brethren so that they might be made into pet-food, and boot polish and lipstick.

The whale is not a dim and stupid fish which breathes water, but he is a mammal like us, with lungs like us, and he must breath air, like us. Most times in fact, every time but once he may rise to the surface and breath without fear. But that one time, as he rises, carefree and vulnerable, and blows, expelling old air, inhaling new, in that instant before he returns once more to the safety of the depths, a great, cruelly-barbed harpoon, stabs deep into his back, and explodes, blowing a great hole in his innards.

Not a hole so that he fills with water and sinks, but so that he suffers, so that he is rent with a fearful agony and terror, so that he bleeds within and his great heart pumps his life blood into his congested lungs and his body becomes engorged and he begins to drown.

And after ten minutes, or twenty minutes or an hour of frenzy, his struggles weaken, and slow and he dies. And he lies there, wallowing in the crimson sea, with his great smiling mouth and his gently glazing eye. And to dignify his death and to honour his courage, they pump him full of air so that he will not sink before the godless mother ship arrives, and then they sail on again, to kill again.

That was Leviathan, the biggest thing ever to have lived, whose movement is slow, yet graceful and majestic - whose great mouth harbours no malice save only for shrimp - whose small black eye sees little and covets nothing - who sings strange songs beneath the sea - who lives in a world of weightless beauty, yet who dies for the cosmetic industry.

That was Leviathan, the great blue whale, whose yesterdays are a hundred million years, yet of his tomorrows, there are none.

851 words

Jock's After-Notes: This was inspired by the book "Leviathan" by John Gordon Davis. I was very pleased with the speech and it had a powerful impact on the audience. However, it only placed third in the contest. A fellow came up to me afterwards and said, "Never leave them on a downer - it doesn't matter how low you take them as long as you bring them back." At the end I had 150 people in tears - but no smiles. Lesson learned. Whilst it's all right to make people cry, you must also make them laugh, or at least feel good at the end of the presentation and with some hope. Of course, in other circumstances, such as a Greenpeace rally, this may have been the correct treatment, but the needs of the occasion should always be born in mind.

Brian Woolf's comments: This speech moved me. It made me feel, and think. Its memory has remained since I discovered it. The disdain in Jock's voice for those who kill these beautiful creatures is felt immediately: his opening words are short, emotive, hard, and pungent; his carefully chosen words that follow paint vivid images and conjure contrasts; they are poetic and touch us. And, in addition, Jock's notes about matching your speech to the occasion is a special piece of non-forgettable advice.

And there's more where this came from...

**Visit Brian Woolf on the web for his complete collection of
articles, speeches, insights and practical advice, at**

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