

Poetic Questioning, Ocean Gratitude

Robi Smith, Vancouver, British Columbia



From the outset, I imagined this piece as a mixed media painting of an underwater rocky shoal that, as the project progressed, would become filled with fish, sea stars, anemones, floating jellies, and more. Before COVID-19 hit, my intention was to create the background painting on wood panels and then cut out myriad paper shapes of sea creatures. I would invite people to choose a creature, colour it in, and write their responses to the question: “If you and the ocean spoke the same language, what would you say to each other?” Together, we would embed their creature response into the painting.

When the need for physical distancing meant not being able to host face-to-face encounters, I put the challenge out through my website and virtual networks. I posted an image of the background painting and asked the above question. I solicited responses from my e-newsletter subscribers, Facebook, and Instagram communities. I also boosted my Facebook post to reach more people in communities up and down the Pacific coast. As I received responses, I painstakingly painted the words onto the painting and added sea creatures throughout.

The responses I’ve received are poetic, questioning, thoughtful, apologetic, deeply personal, and meditative. They include remembered stories and imaginings of what could be. The act of slowly painting the responses onto the artwork has left me feeling both deeply moved and strongly connected to my fellow humans and ocean lovers. Creating the imagery that surrounds the words is a celebration of the beautiful biodiversity that lives just below the surface of our coastal waters here in British Columbia. I have always felt blessed to live here, now more than ever.

Contributing participant, Joann, from Burnaby, British Columbia shared:

I already know we speak the same language. So do we all—that’s a given! Humans have always known the ocean’s language. These days, though, they have to re-learn it because some of them forget. In another way—I would ask the ocean why it sent

me the salmon as a messenger. Of course, I already know the answer. Humans need a messenger from another world to understand the other world. An intermediary. An emissary from the deep to teach us about relationships. Between sweet water and salt water. Between land and sea. Between them and us. Between humans and their food. Between other species and their food. Between the land world and the water world. To be totally astounded by this iconic creature and its giving energy. A Rabbi once told me that Jewish people believe fish offer teachings from the “bigger picture.” Water is the “bigger picture.” If you understand water, you understand everything. And fish, unlike humans, cannot change their environment. Without a watery home, a fish dies. (Celia, Vancouver, contributor)

If I were to say something to the ocean it would be “thank you” on so many levels. Like the fact that just seeing the ocean has a calming effect on me, that it’s home to more life than anywhere else on earth, that life on earth originated from its watery depths, or that the phytoplankton produce much of the oxygen we breathe today. Basically, the ocean is life and for that we should all be thankful. (Sarah, Vancouver, contributor)

Be still my beating heart. Ocean. You are immense, intense, calming, thunderous, joyful, playful, dangerous. Your scent clears my mind and sends visions of soft sand, seashells, driftwood, kelp, and birds. You are human lifeline. I am grateful.