

Embrace your Inner Child

As adults we often forget the pleasures of our childhoods such as afternoon naps, uninhibited pizza consumption, blanket forts, and trips to the zoo and/or aquarium. We are often too distracted by bills, deadlines, global inequalities, and the guilt that accompanies our first-world problems to do anything more than simply recall the delight of such memories. Being “childish” is a state that is notoriously attached with a negative connotation, yet somehow building a blanket fort in the middle of the living room can bring with it sensations that are hard to come by in our adult lives, but age does have its advantages. Our superior minds now make it a possibility to engineer an impenetrable castle consisting of all the blankets in the house instead of a mere 2-blanket fort. Sometimes reliving such experiences with our more mature selves allow us to see them in a new light and enjoy them in a whole new way. While it is much easier for us to revert to being childish in the privacy of our own homes, venturing out...like to the aquarium...can sometimes be embarrassing and attached with all types of social stigmas, but beyond all that it can also lead to new experiences, insights, and fun!

With the new aquarium opening up near my home in Utah, I decided to fulfill my “childish” fancy and bought myself a ticket...and eventually another one...and another. It was unbelievably exciting to see aquatic life I’d only seen on Discovery Channel programs or at my Dentist’s office. Given the fifteen or so year gap from my last visit to the zoo, I was amazed at the similarities unchanged by time, such as the chaotic horde of children, overpriced gift shops, animal-shaped sugar cookies (also overpriced), interactive exhibits, and souvenir penny machines. The lack of fanny-packs, children with cellphones, and a movie theater with invasive chairs were the biggest differences. Another big surprise was that souvenir penny machines are still in existence. I was eager to add an oblong seahorse penny to my collection, digging the pennies and quarters out of my own purse instead of my mother’s.

It is an incredible feat that we can keep millions of gallons of water in a single building and then import fish shipped in UPS tank-boxes from all over the planet. The Loveland Living Planet Aquarium in Utah holds an insignificant 1 million gallons

of water (the largest aquarium in the world holds almost 13 million) and includes four diverse galleries: **Ocean Explorer**, **Antarctic Adventure**, **Journey to South America**, and **Discover Utah**. The whole building is full of wonders including a shark tunnel, a replicated NOAA research ship, a 4D movie theater, a Megadon jaw for many awesome photo-ops, and an alluring gift shop. I felt the familiar sting of disappointment as I looked in to see an oversized plush sea turtle, strikingly similar to the one I had asked for, but did not receive, for Christmas when I was seven years old. Other items drew my attention as well like the rack of adorable manta ray slippers, which sadly didn't carry a Women's size 9.

After getting my ticket for *The Last Reef* in the fancy 4D theater, I had no idea what was in store. The interactive theater was equipped with spraying mechanisms that were located on the seat in front of you, on your own headrest, and near your feet, that would emit a faux 'sea spray' corresponding with any splash on the screen. The cries from the children a couple of rows in front of me were equally as entertaining as the film. These cries inevitably followed each spray to the face, neck, or feet, accompanied by an odd smell. The 'total integration' idea makes the experience a little terrifying because the sprays are not emitted gently or quietly, making one jumpy and anxiously bracing for the next attack.

As a youngling my dad would hoist me up onto his shoulders any time we were at the zoo, which was every year on my birthday, sacrificing his own comfort in the 80-degree heat to give me a vantage viewing point. As I approached the very first exhibit I found myself missing my dad's shoulders and his 6'5" advantage. Even though I've grown substantially since my days of visiting the zoo, I'm still unable to see some of the exhibits. I'd frequently find myself slightly shoving children out of the way, in the most discreet way possible, to get an unimpeded view. I'm not the only one whose etiquette was breaking down with each minute spent in the aquarium. The social dynamic is fragile and everyone's emotions are heightened because of the severely unbalanced people to space ratio as well as the needy, hyper, and loud children that don't know the concept of a "personal bubble." It is no mystery why everyone's actions become more aggressive, defensive, and indifferent, equally feeding off one another in an act of self-preservation.

My own emotional state seemed to have a range I didn't think possible for a two-hour experience. Being single and alone at the aquarium seemed to open my awareness of each emotional surge. Guilt, for not letting any children squeeze in front of me. Envy, of the children who inevitably got the front row and best views. Anger, at parents' assumptive and entitled nature in regards to their children. Gratitude, for not having to keep track of any children. Apprehension, for not wanting to appear like a spinster and/or kidnapper. Annoyance at children in general, and relief that I haven't yet been thrust into motherhood. Despite these feelings, the positive emotions surfaced above them such as amazement, gratitude, and awe for Mother Nature.

The aquarium does offer a certain respite that zoos do not, lessening the exhaustion with an indoor facility complete with air-conditioning. Even the noise is muffled in the **Ocean Explorer** gallery, especially in the shark tank. Being surrounded by 300,000 gallons of water dampens the noise and the iridescent blue shadows create a calming effect, imitating an "under the sea" perspective. Children run around tugging at their parents' purses or shirts yelling out that they found Nemo or Dory. I'm disappointed that I don't see my favorite character Bruce, the Australian and "fish-friendly" great white shark. The varied tanks include coral reefs, cuttlefish, blood red shrimp, and several long and skinny fish - as their names will imply - such as razorfish, pipefish, and trumpet fish that float around vertically with their snouts pointed towards the ground. The ornate and slightly skeletal looking seahorses have their tails coiled around anything they can find and sway gently in the water. Their species make me jealous because the male seahorse is the one to carry the babies to term in an outward uterus. Apparently there are weedy and leafy seadragons, but their camouflage is clearly effective because it was impossible to determine whether the leaves and weeds in the tank were actual seaweed or seadragons.

In addition to the more tropical fish galleries, the **Antarctic Adventure** gallery features stout little penguins found at the bottom of the world. This exhibit spans two floors so that you can see them waddle around on land as well as being able to observe them in the water. On land, they occasionally charge each other

with their fins thrust out behind them. In the water, they gain speed that seems improbable for their portly little bodies and tiny fins. They shoot up like bullets onto land in an effortless display, landing gracefully on their bellies. After leaving the penguin crossing, the exhibit leads you into a room with several types of jellies, including a species of upside-down jellyfish. The jellyfish pulse around the pure blue tank, their fleshy bells standing out in beautiful contrast. They keep a consistent rhythm to their motion, floating around in no particular pattern. Their frilly tails drift in each direction and it's a small miracle they don't end up all tangled up in themselves or with each other.

A favorite exhibit of mine, clearly overlooked by the general audience, was the large, left-handed lobster. Its two-foot long body was hidden in the depths of his rocky lair, with just his two pinchers taking up the entirety of the entrance, intimidating any visitors. His left claw was similar (and equally large) as Davy Jones's in the *Pirates of the Caribbean*. His eyes peek above his claws and occasionally one of his long gangly antennae or legs dart out to sense something invisible in the water. As if sensing my interest, he does a 360-degree turn so I can see all of his glory. Finally, a family stops behind me and I hear the mother exclaim, "what a tasty-looking crustacean!" I'm sure that during a faceoff the lobster would probably win or at least leave her without an arm before making it into a boiling pot of water.

Another favorite was the river otters in the **Discover Utah** gallery. Undoubtedly in competition with the shark tank for the most popular exhibit, the long line hardly moved. People were rooted in front of the tank, completely transfixed by the big brown otters swimming laps and characteristically eating things on their tummies. As the otters were swimming laps they'd playfully dart between logs, all the while doing graceful 360s, and rubbing their backs against the glass. White currents of bubbles would rise up all over their body from their thick fur (387,000 hairs per inch!) as they swam, their stalwart legs limply tucked against their body. When emerging for air, their bellies would remain completely submerged, only their nose and tail exposed. Even though this exhibit was the clear favorite of the **Discover Utah** wing, it also included an array of poisonous desert

animals including, but not limited to, scorpions, canyon frogs, snakes, tarantulas, and desert tortoises.

The last exhibit, **Journey to South America**, simulates the rainforest-like environment. The humidity hits the moment one passes through the hanging “vines” in the entrance, instantly embracing you in a warm, moist hug as you meander through the exhibits. Displays include prehistorically large cockroaches and beetles the size of your hand or the size of a small child’s head. Features include one of the largest freshwater fish in existence, the ancient Arapaima, drifting around the huge tank gray and grumpy. There are birds such as toucans and also poison dart frogs. Both are characteristic of tropical species, with their vivid colors and jet-black bodies. Several empty tanks are being prepared for the upcoming piranhas, caimans, and anacondas.

I frequently fell victim to the empty exhibits, often waiting in front of the glass with my eyes straining for any glimpse of life. Realizing about five minutes later that the enclosure was empty, with a sign explaining that it was being prepped for a future exhibit. I’d sulk away in shame and swear that I would not be tricked again...which would inevitably happen ten minutes later. Other exhibits were simply hard to observe because the animals would disappear in their well-simulated natural habitats. Oftentimes people would join together in a collective effort trying to spot whatever creature was inside while other people stood completely still and waited in hopes of seeing anything scurry or slither into sight.

These habitats are designed to make the animals as comfortable as possible, hopefully lessening their anxiety that comes with captivity. These controversial topics surrounding animal exhibit industries are heavily weighed against the educational benefits they bring to children and the general public. For most people, travelling is expensive, time consuming, and hardly offers any opportunities to see animals in the wild. The one time I did see a wild river otter was for a split second as a blurred flash of brown fur diving into the water, which hardly offered any time to even recognize it as an otter. The other experience with otters was wearing the otter-trimmed fur coat of my sister’s...the winter style for New Yorkers.

It is true that some do not absorb the educational benefits that aquariums provide. At the seahorse exhibit, a man next to me points to a pipefish (that the plaque next to his shoulder indicated) and tells his four children that it must be a funny looking type of seahorse. Other guests walk slowly by each tank with their arms crossed and their stride never halting to truly observe the animals or the facts listed next to them. Others simply take a picture on their cellphone, offering a mere fifteen seconds of their time in front of the tank while they post it to their Facebook or Instagram.

It is a comfort to know that despite failed dreams of marine biology, fear of scuba diving, or lack of money for travel, people will still be able to see the wonders of aquatic life. Aquariums make it possible to observe manta rays soaring through the water like birds, having sharks swim dangerously close to your fingers, or seeing otters playing tag with each other. Some children were lucky enough to have wildlife biologists for parents or to have wildlife in their backyards. However, most children are excluded due to living in more urbanized areas and are restricted to cats, dogs, or goldfish. By bringing the diversity of world ecosystems closer to us, we are able to make connections with wild animals and gain new knowledge. For example, did you know that cuttlefish have three hearts?

Despite not having children to use as an excuse to visit the aquarium, I found that it was rather enjoyable on my own. Keeping in touch with our inner child is not only fun but reminds us that some things should not be forgotten or relinquished...except perhaps eating pizza in moderation. So, go and build a blanket fort, take an afternoon to visit your local aquarium or zoo, and indulge in one of those animal-shaped sugar cookies.

Purpose Statement

In this paper I wanted to capture the essence of aquariums and other exhibit driven places. I wanted to address how they appeal mostly to kids and how our associations with them come from our own childhood memories. I felt compelled to encourage more single adults to go and be interactive rather than just those with little kids and families. I wanted to be realistic in my opinions about the place and honest about the expectations but still have it be heartwarming and enjoyable despite the exhausting children, crowds, and less exciting exhibits. Overall it was great being able to write about my experience and I enjoyed adding in a different intro that appeals to the child in all of us. I hope this hooks the reader on a more personal level instead of just telling them about my experiences at the aquarium,



which I was even bored writing about it. I also wanted to challenge our society's notion that everything is "for the children who are the future..." I feel like this car sticker pretty well sums it up. The writing process for this paper was similar to the science essay. I kept getting stuck because I think I was gearing my writing towards a style that wasn't really mine. I enjoyed the final draft I finally came up with because it is less "I" intensive and less formal. I did have fun going to the aquarium a bunch

of times. The second time I went I still felt self-conscious about being there alone, so I dressed in my interviewing clothes and brought a notebook and a pen in order to look more like a journalist. It was fun and it seemed like people were more respectful to give me a better view...so that was kind of interesting.

My writing overall still represents my struggle to transition smoothly between paragraphs and I still have a hard time reigning in my wordy sentences and commas. I've noticed that I really like making long sentences that have a list of things in it. I tried to do less of that in this essay, but I'm just so good at making lists. I'm disappointed that my descriptions aren't as good or original as I'd like them to be in this essay but I didn't want them to sound forced or overdone.

I would like to think that I've made some improvement over the course but I feel think my first essay is still the strongest. I've become more aware of my writing style and the good and bad tendencies I have when I write. I think one strategy that was really effective for me was creating multiple introductions. I did that with this last essay even though it wasn't required because I figured that it could help give me a different perspective and it yielded good things because the final intro really gives the essay an entirely different dynamic. An important lesson that I need to implement more in the future is to just write no matter how terrible it sounds in the first, second, and even third drafts.