

What I would most like to believe



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In his remarkable book, “Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel,” Carl Safina gives us a reasonable approach to understanding our non-human neighbors who share our planet. Story after story takes us closer to elephants, wolves, whales and other creatures who fascinate us, causing us to wonder about them as sentient beings. Our interactions with wild things teach us how they communicate and how we could improve our own ability to communicate with them.

In one of the most perceptive passages, the author explains he would “like to believe that whales are trying to send us a message.” He knows that would make whales quite special. It would also make us feel special knowing non-humans wanted to “talk.” He offers this insight: “[How] very special we are is our favorite story, [our] one overriding conceit and one universally shared delusion” (this recalls John Muir’s observation about our human-centric “conceitful eyes and knowledge”).

Safina’s next admission, or confession, is one we could all learn from: “Me, I am most skeptical of those things I’d most like to believe, precisely because I’d like to believe them. Wanting to believe something can skew one’s view.”

Each time I read this I’m more impressed by his honesty—the way he really nails our human hubris. And, of course, he presents a powerful challenge to religious belief.

In seminary I read most of Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner’s books. I’ll never forget meeting him in a class at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, hearing him speak about his creative take on faith, his own faith, and religion in general. One line that caught my attention was that faith is essentially “wishful thinking.” He wasn’t necessarily criticizing that. It was more a recognition that we see what we want to see or believe what we choose to believe—what we wish was true. Not always a bad thing, as long as we admit it.

Animals become our teachers. They are a mystery to us and we want to know about their lives. what they feel.



Seals, like all animals, have something to teach humans.

what they think. Because we are curious creatures with wishful thinking, we want to believe they long to communicate with us in ways we could better understand.

I was most amazed by the stories that Safina relates about experiences people have had with orca (“killer whales”). Spending most of my early life in the Pacific Northwest, I lived in orca country. While living on an island there, a dozen years ago, I stopped in my tracks while hiking a cliffside trail, mesmerized to watch a pod of 16 orca swim by, their tall black and white dorsal fins slicing the salty waters of the Sound. Another day, while clearing a forest path on another side of the island, I heard a loud burst of water. Turning my head I was delighted to see a gray whale swimming close to shore below me. I was the only one there to see, to hear, to feel what that was like to be so near that magnificent creature. An unforgettable moment.

Have you had one of those incredible moments with a wild animal? You want to think or believe they sense the same things you do in those encounters. Is it fear? Is it wonder-inspiring curiosity? Do you feel that something is communicated, that the animal is telling you something?

There are times I sense that relationship even with the smallest of creatures. I want to believe that cardinal on the branch, that bumblebee on the bush, that jumping spider on my hand

somehow knows I mean them no harm. I’d love to believe that turtle in the pond, coyote running through the night field or grazing deer “understood” me somehow, someway.

Reflecting on what I would most “like” to believe, I suppose I would like to believe we will soon choose the best ways to treat the earth, the animals and each other better, to reverse the destruction we are causing; I would like to believe there is a happy life after death, but nothing like what religions have told us. I would like to believe that “beliefs” would not be so important as how we live our lives.

Honestly, I don’t feel the need to believe, but rather to know. I wish I knew how to speak many languages, if major diseases would be cured in my lifetime, to know what it was like to live on every continent on earth, and maybe find out what kind of beings live on other planets.

What would animals most like to believe? We can’t know that, but probably they would wish to believe we mean them no harm, and value them as fellow inhabitants of this ever-smaller planet.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.