



October 2019

Dear Friends,

At our annual Pet Service I was asked 'Do animals have a soul?' My instinctive answer was yes, but how do we know this? Well, the word "soul" pops up everywhere. We speak of soulless corporations or describe people as the 'heart and soul' of something. People say they love someone 'body and soul' and 'soul music' gets us swaying. In each case, "soul" denotes deep feelings and core values. Feelings form the basis for what humans have described for millennia as the *soul* or *spirit*,

Studies increasingly show that many non-human beings feel *emotionally*. Elephants exhibit grief, dolphins and whales express joy, parrots can be cranky, pigs and cows terrified, chickens saddened, monkeys seemingly embarrassed. Experiments show that rats become agitated when seeing surgery performed on other rats and when presented with a trapped lab-mate and a piece of chocolate, will free their caged brethren before eating. Science is rediscovering what Charles Darwin concluded, that the variations between humans and other species in their capacity to feel and express emotion are differences in degree rather than in kind. It's a short step from there to recognising that individual animals have personalities and don't just live but have lives.

How does this relate to us or animals having a soul? Sentience, the capacity of an organism to feel, is fundamental to being alive. So as humans have souls, is this more about being able to feel emotionally than about being alive? We're motivated far more by passion than by intellect. What we feel deeply is what drives us, for good and ill, right and wrong. Anyone with a dog will tell you that they know right from wrong and will intentionally do things to please their human companions.

As long as we're alive and therefore feeling we're connected to one another and to the natural world - we are *ensouled*. There are extraordinary examples of *ensoulment* among animals demonstrating compassion, from an ape saving a crow to a gorilla protecting a three-year-old boy when he fell into her enclosure. A particularly striking case of animal gratitude occurred when a female humpback whale was found entangled in nylon fishing ropes. It took over an hour for divers to free the whale, cutting away ropes that were digging and cutting into the blubber. When the whale was free, instead of leaving the scene, she hung around swimming in a large circle, carefully approaching each diver separately. She gently nuzzled each one until she had touched them all before swimming out to sea. Amazing!

Animals that express gratitude, play, contemplate nature, act to save a fellow creature, or react mournfully at the loss of family or close companions are all, in my view, demonstrating aspects of connectedness. Such connectedness is the root of spirituality - with the capacity to feel and emote being central. The stronger the capability of a given species for fellow feeling, the more that species can be said to exhibit *soulfulness*. Viewing things in this way helps us to understanding our place in creation and to appreciate the inheritance we hold in common with other sentient beings on this increasingly small, restive, and fragile planet.

Rev'd Nicki