



## INTRODUCTION

by Marian Van Eyk McCain

### All in the Same Boat

Have you noticed how, even though we know the story of evolution, many of the ways that we talk about Nature and about our fellow creatures serve to drive a semantic wedge between ‘it’ and us, between ‘them’ and us? So much so, in fact, that it is quite a challenge to talk about other life forms without falling into the trap of separating ourselves from them with our words.

As we all know, there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that our species *Homo sapiens* is a member of the Kingdom called Animalia. In other words, we are animals. Like all other members of that Kingdom, we have a slot into which we fit. You can find our particular slot on any diagram of the Animalia tree. Specifically, we belong to the Phylum: Chordata (we have spines), the Subphylum: Vertebrata (a special sort of spines), the Class: Mammalia (we suckle our young), the Order: Primates (along with apes, and monkeys), the Family: Hominidae (one of the so-called ‘great apes’) and the Genus: *Homo* (men and women, boys and girls).

So yes, we are definitely animals. Yet from the way we often speak about ourselves—and even the way we think about ourselves—you might come to the conclusion that we, in our culture, are in some sort of denial about it.

The problem is that after centuries of imagining ourselves as separate from the rest of the animal kingdom and forgetting that all of these other life forms are related to us by our very DNA, our language has in turn been shaped to a huge extent by our beliefs. So that makes it hard to avoid the linguistic traps.

For example we find ourselves using phrases like ‘humans and animals,’ as though we were something different and not animals. We find ourselves talking about how much we enjoy ‘walking in Nature,’ as though there were any place on our planet were Nature isn’t. Because of course Nature is us. Nature is in us and everywhere and in everything. Even in the heart of the city, Nature is not just the pigeons and rats and cockroaches and mice and the slivers of living green that grow up in the cracks between the paving stones, but all-pervasive. The air is full of unseen creatures; our own bodies have other creatures living on and within them, creatures in their millions, most of them smaller that can be seen with the naked eye, all living and breathing and doing their thing.

We find ourselves falling into these linguistic traps, not just out of habit but because it can be hard to find other, better alternatives. However, just as wheels create ruts and ruts in turn capture wheels, not only does thought shape language but language ends up shaping thought and perpetuating attitudes. It takes a big effort to heave ourselves out of the rut and pay conscious, mindful attention to the way we speak of other creatures.

The more we learn to stay mindful of this fact that we, too, are animals, the more offensive it can start sounding to our ears when we hear others use the word ‘animal’ pejoratively, as in ‘He’s no better than an animal,’ (particularly when we reflect on the irony of it, given that we ourselves are the species with the very worst behaviour record of all time!) Yet hopefully, the more we stay mindful, the better we shall become at developing a vocabulary that better reflects the true relationships between ourselves and what author David Abram calls the ‘more-than-human’ world.

The very first time I learned that in the Native American culture other species are referred to as ‘all our relations,’ I immediately felt the sheer ‘rightness’ of that term. Which is why I have chosen that phrase as the title for this little volume in the GreenSpirit book series: a book that that specifically honours all those other life forms with whom we share the planet.

They are all our relations. How we treat them, how we perceive them and feel about them and interact with them—and the extent to which we respect them—is, I maintain, a measure of our true humanity and a measure of our true worth. For along with them we make up the delicate web of life that makes this place liveable and beautiful. Whatever damage we do to that web, we do to ourselves, to each other, to our children and grandchildren and to all our relations of every size and kind. If they fail to thrive and survive, so do we. We are all in this together. All in the same small, fragile boat we call Planet Earth, floating in the dark, starry vastness of inhospitable space.

It is my pleasure and privilege to bring to you this collection of writings that honours, in many difference ways and voices, our GreenSpirit connections with all those members of the more-than-human world who travel alongside us in this little boat.