

Animals and spirituality

Jay Griffiths has published a new book called *How Animals Heal Us*. Here she explores how the four-legged, fur and scaled ones can connect us back to soul-source and asks whether animals themselves can be spiritual

It seems appropriate that the Lascaux caves in south-western France, with their ancient paintings of animals, should be discovered by one – a dog called Robot.

On 12 September 1940, Robot began curiously investigating a hole by an uprooted tree. His companion, 18-year-old Marcel Ravidat, followed his cue – and the profound discovery was made.

In most cave art, while the paintings of animals are wonder-swept and awestruck, the humans are portrayed as haphazard little stick people. It is the animals who are the route to the spirit world, and from earliest times animals have been considered as gods ensouling the world in limitless dimensions of sacredness.

God is a horse: Northern China had a cult of Heavenly Horses, and both Hinduism and Buddhism have a horse deity.

God is a cow: the milk of intimacy and mighty benevolence flowing together from heaven. Cow is sacred in Hinduism, provisioning all the Earth's abundance in fruit and vegetables.

God is a fox: a blaze of intelligence, a perfect nose for night,

and a gift for friendship. The Japanese deity of foxes presides over tea and *sake*, fertility, rice and household wellbeing.

God is crocodilian: the Egyptian god Sobek took the form of a crocodile, and Sobek's main temple was in the city of Crocodilopolis.

God is a raven: he hops. God is a scamp with beady eyes and black feathers. God is not solemn and never goes to church, because he is easily bored. A light-fingered thief, Raven fingers light itself. He then gives it away in the refracted poetry of sun, moon and stars. He is a major god for Native Americans of the northwest.

God is a bear: God has a taste for berries and enjoys a tippie. God has a big bum and a good waddle on him. Bear has been worshipped widely across the world, from Finnish and Celtic to Ainu people.

Why *wouldn't* all these be gods?

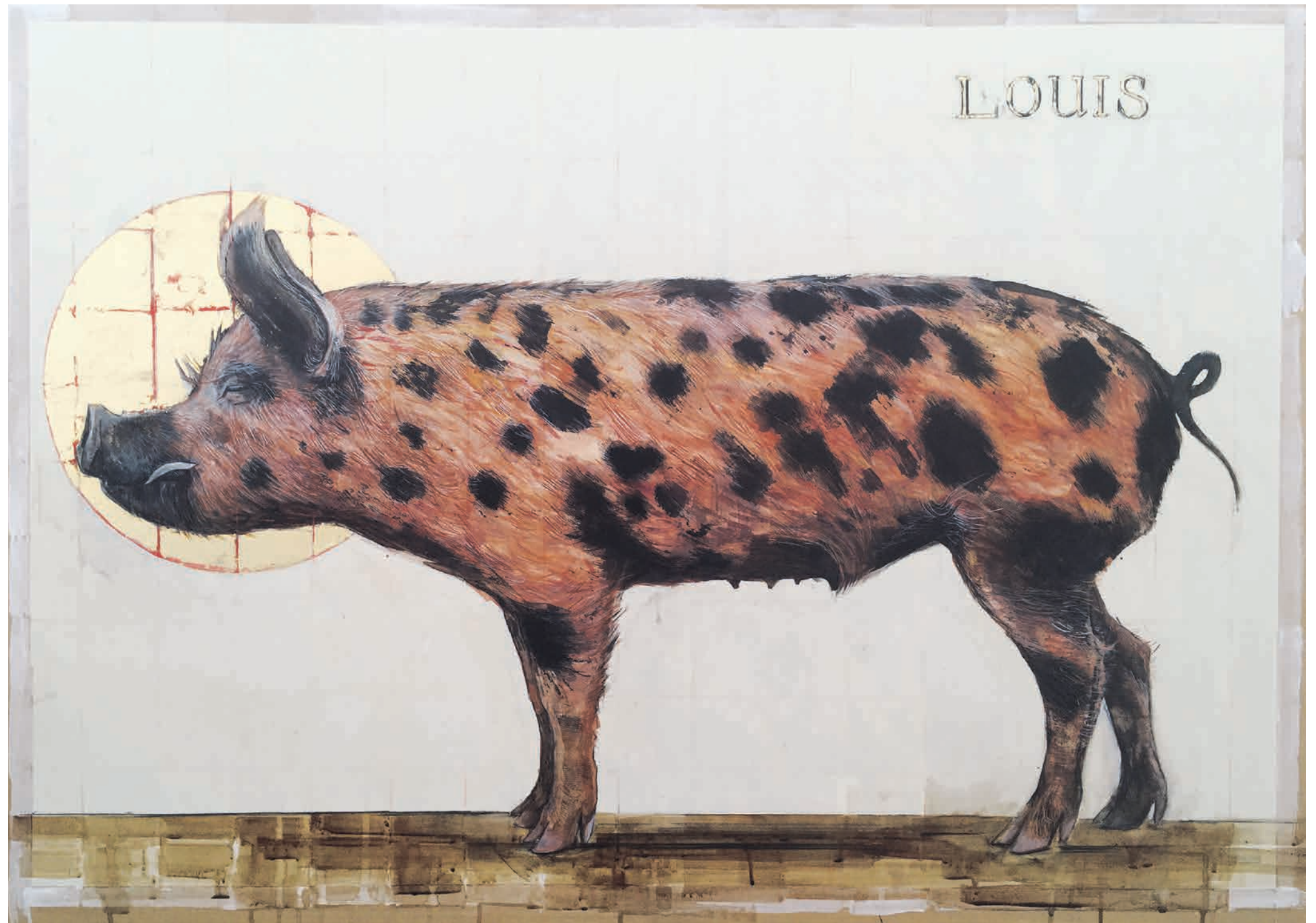
In both the Bible and the Qur'an, donkeys are given the ability to see the angelic and the divine when humans cannot. Birds have widely been considered messengers of the gods, and the image of an angel is as necessarily winged as a bird.

For me, the bird of heaven is the skylark. The collective noun is an ascension of larks, and as the bird ascends it sings

until its distilled song becomes brightness, magnetised to heaven's quintessence, pinpointing God.

ARCHETYPES OF TRANSCENDENCE

The crane, for the Eveny people of Siberia, is a bird of extreme sacredness. In Japan, the crane is holy, and by legend if someone folds a thousand origami cranes, the bird will answer their prayer. The Eurasian demoiselle cranes can fly over the Himalayas, three miles above sea level, disappearing from human sight, and in legends are considered the messengers of highest heaven. The collective noun is a dance of cranes,



Louis by Olivia Lomenech Gill
Ink and watercolour on Pergamenata
vellum paper, with gold leaf



Golden Egg by Olivia Lomenech Gill
Etching with gold leaf
www.oliviagill.com

and the dance of two mating cranes is a symmetry of pure, divine grace. Their *pas de deux* is a *pas de dieu*.

Butterflies have long been seen as archetypes of spiritual transcendence in death, as they transform from earthbound chrysalis to winged beauty: the body dies, but the soul lives.

Bees are, by tradition, guides to the dying – and to the living. The Qur'an speaks of six revelations given by Allah to creation, in which the first revelation is to the prophets, the second to the Earth, the third to the sky and the fourth to the honeybee: "And thy Lord has inspired the bee," a sign "for those who give thought", teaching people to care for communities and to embody the traits of bees.

Ancient Egyptians had a tradition of 'Bee Teachings', in which the humming of bees was understood to stimulate the release of the Elixirs of Metamorphosis, an exquisite phrase for the alchemy of bees, transforming nectar to honey.

Modernity is slaughtering the bees in their millions, and both the wrongness of this and the mammoth stupidity of it (given that we humans would face starvation without the bees) are dramatically set against the wisdom and goodness perceived in bees since time immemorial.

So can animals themselves be spiritual? The answer may be yes.

Primates including baboons, gorillas and chimpanzees seem to display a sensitivity to something *beyond*, a primal spirituality in the face of the forces of Nature. Chimpanzees engage in 'waterfall dances', in a ritual seen by the primatologist and campaigner Jane Goodall and others. The chimp approaches the falls with bristling hair – a visible sign of heightened arousal.

Chimpanzees normally avoid water, but in these dances, which last ten to fifteen minutes, the chimp is charged up with the power of the falls, throwing rocks that crash as percussion, drumming with the waterfall in uproarious

exuberance. Although he has come alone, he does not act as if he is alone: he is dancing with the waterfall, magnifying its force, his 'godbody' on full alleluia.

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At the end of the waterfall dance, the chimp quietens, often sitting on a rock midstream in a mood of reflection. As Goodall points out, the chimp's brain is so evidently like ours and their emotions are close to our own, including happiness, sadness, fear and despair, and so she asks, "Why wouldn't they also have feelings of some kind of spirituality, which is really being amazed at things outside yourself? I think chimpanzees are as spiritual as we are."

Maybe animals are, like the dog called Robot, guiding us to a deep and underground soul-source, the necessary spirituality. We could, with relief, acknowledge divinity again in the real and living world, knowing it as the truth that has so far vouchsafed humanity's time on Earth. Then the collective psyche could come to its senses and the individual soul come home to itself, letting the soul-medicine that has always surrounded us work its ordinary miracles, in the holy and reckless plurality of the animals, each one an iteration of life's deepest prayer: *Let there be life.* R

Jay Griffiths is the author of *How Animals Heal Us*, published by Hamish Hamilton (2025).

“When we turn our gaze toward the plant kingdom it gives us information about the composition of our own being.”

–Hilma af Klint

Hilma af Klint: What Stands Behind the Flowers
An exhibition of recently discovered botanical drawings focusing on the artist's exploration of spirituality in Nature is on show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York until 27 September this year. www.moma.org