

Consider a small twig on the vast tree of life



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

"It is not surprising that we are often a mystery to ourselves, that, despite our manifest pretensions, we are so far from being masters even in our own small house." Thus, Carl Sagan and his wife Ann Druyan explore the murky mystery of humanity in their book "Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors" (1992). They expertly place our interconnected existence in perspective with: "the inescapable recognition that, for better or worse, we humans are just a small twig on the vast and many-branched tree of life."

Digging down deep in the distant past out of which humanity emerged, Sagan and Druyan expose not only our roots but the lifeblood we share with all others. "With every layer of the mystery we strip away, our circle of kinship widens. Not from some uncritical sentimentalism, but out of tough-minded scientific scrutiny, we find the deepest affinities between ourselves and the other forms of life on Earth."

Descending back to the most basic elements of life on earth, the authors re-

mind us of something we might forget in the distractions of everyday life, or in our dreams of worlds beyond – the air we share and depend on. The root "to breathe" is embedded in terms like respiratory, inspire, aspire, conspire, perspire, transpire and expire, as well as "spirit" and "spiritual." We have roots in the air, as naturalist John Burroughs wrote: "We are rooted to the air through our lungs and to the soil through our stomachs. We are walking trees and floating plants" ("The Grist of the Gods," Leaf and Tendril).

If a biologist from another solar system arrived, they would discover "the teeming lifeforms of Earth ... are all made of almost exactly the same organic stuff, the same molecules ... and [the same] genetic codebook." The extraterrestrial explorer would find "The organisms on this planet are not only kin; they live in intimate mutual contact ... dependent on one another for life itself, and sharing the same fragile surface layer." The authors reason that the alien scientist would come to these conclusions based on observation, not on ideology, authority or faith.

After making a strong case for our natural origins, one chapter presents the fundamental question: "What Is Human?" This is a brilliant analysis of the human quest, by philosophers, scientists and religious authorities, to dis-

tinguish us from (other) animals. Sagan and Druyan take apart each historical argument that humans are the dominant species due to reason, language, consciousness, culture, morality, even religion. The writers refer to research studies of various animals including chimps, bonobos, dogs, birds and other fellow creatures that suggest we aren't as unique as we think; in our condescending perspective we imagine we are distinctly above animals. They say this is essential for us because it justifies making animals subservient to our wishes, eating them or wearing them, without feelings of guilt. "Those beings, we tell ourselves, are not like us." They quote Charles Darwin: "Animals whom we have made our slaves, we do not like to consider our equals." Naturally, their next chapter is entitled "The Animal Within."

Sagan and Druyan respond to the notion that a big difference between humans and other species is religion. "Only humans, it is said, have religion, and that settles the matter. But what is religion? How could we know whether animals have it?" Could dogs or apes have reverence? It doesn't mean they pray or hold a theology, yet some creatures have a kind of respect for beings who are more powerful. The authors speculate that "a generalized religious predisposition ... may be commonplace

in the kingdom of the animals." This is something for serious contemplation, if only to better understand our own possibly innate sense of "something greater" – a god or nature – to stand before with reverence and humility. Ultimately we have to admit we are "insecure about who we are ... trying to put as much distance as possible between us and our humble origins." That old human hubris is exposed; we forget that humanity arose from the humus itself.

Faced with those humble origins, however shadowy and sometimes frightening to think about, does religious faith help or hinder? If beliefs are based on human superiority, does that lead to a perspective that places one particular faith above all others? How do beliefs relate to the way we treat others who don't believe the same things, or the way we treat other species or the planet itself? These are critically important questions that Sagan and Druyan help address. As they conclude, if we choose to look into the darkest places of our past, we may find "a light by which to see our children safely home."

With an honest backward glance we can look forward with faith or freethought.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. Learn more at chighland.com.