

# Eternity in a second

What a touching moment can teach us about kinship beyond humans

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If a second can encompass an eternity, it was this moment. Coming up from the stunning Athirapally Falls in Kerala (southern India), I stopped to observe and photograph a group of monkeys. They were Bonnet macaques, commonly found in this part of India. While going down to the Falls, my colleagues and I had observed them with interest and amusement, what with their constant playfulness and occasional attempts at stealing food from people. On our way back, we stopped to observe them for a while, taking pictures and videos, especially of babies and juveniles tumbling over each other, pulling each other's tails, and in general, making merry.

From amongst the large troupe, a mother and a young one in particular attracted my attention, and I noticed the latter looking intensely at me. I put down my camera and looked back into its eyes with whatever friendliness I could muster, well aware that looking back at a monkey can be interpreted as a threat. It did not seem to feel threatened, and I saw no aggressiveness in it or its mother. Tentatively, I extended my hand to it (even as a colleague said "careful, it may scratch you!"). It looked at

my hand, bent down to smell my forefinger, sat back upright and ... to my utter and delighted surprise, reached out with its fingers to touch mine. It was just a second's touch, but for me it was like all of evolution had entered that moment, symbolizing an eternal kinship that I would fail utterly to describe in words. I felt blessed.

I have had a few other such moments in the last few decades. A penguin and I connected in Patagonia (Argentina) many moons back. As I stood on a path looking at a group of them jumping into the sea and then waddling out in what seemed to be a display meant specially for some raptly attentive humans, one penguin came up the path towards me. I froze, as did a colleague of mine who was equally surprised by this rather bold approach. It came up right to my legs and looked up. We measured each other for a second, and then it bent down and gave my foot (fortunately, shielded by a shoe!) a little peck. It briefly looked up again, then waddled off. I recall feeling the same delight then, as I did more recently with the Bonnet monkey baby's touch.

On that same trip in Patagonia, a group of us ventured out into the sea on a boat for some whale-watching. Not too far out, we were approached by a Right whale mother and cub. The pair circled our boat a few times, the baby frequently surfacing to look at us. All of us on the boat were silent, only occasionally raising our cameras to try to take a picture. Though the adult was twice the size of our vessel, and it could easily have capsized us, I was for some reason not scared. Its peaceful intent and the curiosity of the calf, neither of them even remotely aggressive, seemed very clear. This was the first time ever I'd seen a whale, and three decades later, the scene remains vivid in my mind, and the feeling of being blessed, in my heart.

It is these moments that bring alive the magic of life, that make our connections with the rest of nature real, that remind us of the essential one-ness of life. Not just with other animals, but with plants too, we can enter into these moments if we are open to them. The awe and respect one senses while passing under an impressively buttressed tree soaring into the clouds in a rainforest, the calm one feels when sitting under a banyan (Ficus) tree, the feeling of wonder on touching a 'touch-me-not' (Mimosa), and seeing it close up in defense (and then not wanting to do it anymore as it seems like harassment), the utter surprise when seeing a colony of mushrooms that has suddenly, overnight, sprouted up on a 'dead' log after a shower – so many moments that can take place in our daily lives.

And, once these moments are over, comes the bitter realization of what we are doing to the wonder that is nature. And thereby, to ourselves. The dry statistics of how many species are endangered, how many have already disappeared, and of how human activity is pushing the Earth towards a mass extinction scenario, are in themselves alarming. But scary as they are, they cannot convey the sense of loneliness, trauma, fearful surprise, and much else that the last remaining individuals of a species would be feeling. Images of a polar bear caught on a shrinking ice floe, of the world's two last remaining white rhinos, of a straw stuck in a sea turtle's nostril, have generated indignation, anger, and sadness amongst millions of people. But most of us still go about our daily lives as if this is normal, or as if things will right themselves in some magical way.

Many of us will probably act based on the rational argument that mass extinction and what we are doing to the planet's environment is threatening us as humans too; but it seems to me that many, many more would get out of their comfort zones and do something if they have had even one transformative moment of inter-species connect. This means making such opportunities available to kids growing up in today's urban, denaturalized, screen-junkied society, even if it is about going into one's backyard and observing an unfurling leaf, wondering at a newly blooming flower, taking the time to see a caterpillar turning into a butterfly, hunting for the source of a flowery fragrance, having a squirrel come take a morsel from the hand in a park, or being still enough to let a foraging bird come close.

Transformative moments of beyond-human kinship also are more likely when we transcend the tight baggage of human superiority that a strand of Western modernity has instilled in us, especially those of us 'educated' in formal schools and colleges. In this constrained mindset, animals other than humans are apparently not capable of independent thought, of feeling, [of a sense of play](#), of self-consciousness. Almost anyone who has had a dog or cat or some other non-human animal as a companion for long enough would know that these are untrue. Perhaps these have been ingrained in us so we don't feel so bad about the way we behave towards the rest of nature.

I recall learning about the 'pyramid of life' in school biology, with humans supposedly at the pinnacle of evolution, pre-supposing a 'natural' hierarchy that then justifies our domination of the earth. But if from childhood we were enabled to keep our minds and hearts open, to learn from and not suppress our own instincts when we, for instance, play with a dog, we may not be so straitjacketed in our outlook.

If we realized early in life that a sense of beauty and values can and must go together – what and colleague and I have elsewhere [called aesth-etics](#), we might be much more willing to be out on the streets in defence of the rest of nature. And we might be indignant that, harking back to my whale experience, the 'Right whale' is called such because it was apparently the right whale to hunt: trusting or curious enough to get close to commercial harpooning ships. We might then join the growing movement to recognize the 'rights of nature', not simply mirroring human rights, but promoting basic respect towards all life.

We might also be open to learning from ancient cultures that 'co-existence' with other species is very possible, indeed crucial; but that this is not about the absence of any conflict, and it is certainly not about removing people from ecosystems so that the government or some corporate entity can protect wildlife. It is not about some false romantic idea of harmony forever in a garden of Eden, which has been the foundation of some Western or modern notions of wildlife conservation as well as some variants of the animal rights movement. It is not about disregarding that many people also experience (as have I) unpleasant, nasty, sometimes life-threatening encounters with other animals. Rather, it is about recognizing cosmological and material relationships that encompass [harmony and conflict, ease](#)

[and unease](#), life and death. Much, in fact, like a human family or community! In essence, it is about enabling worlds in which life can thrive in a balance of give and take, mutual respect, and the interconnectedness of kinship.

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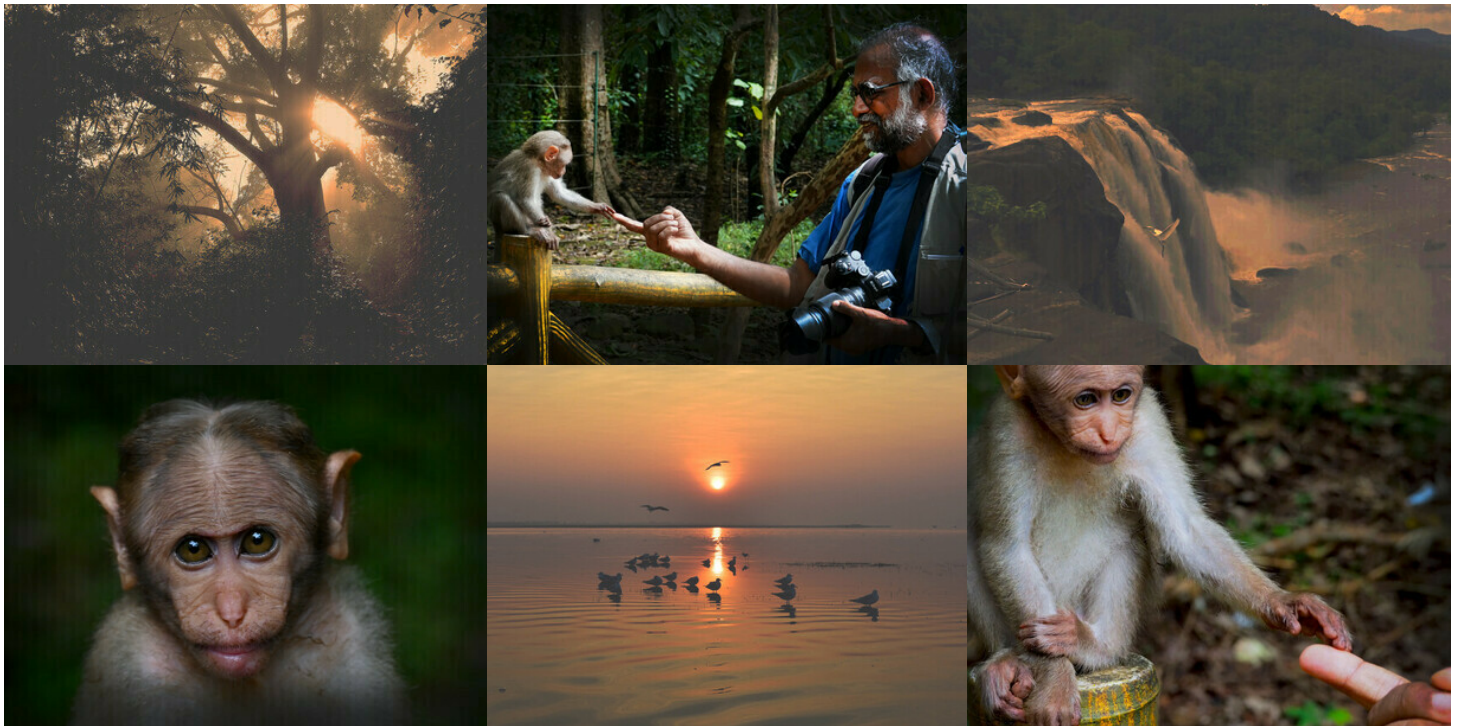
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An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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