In 1979 I had a dream: "I was walking by a river, and I came upon a bird. The bird was very beautiful and very perfect. I wanted to talk to the bird, but I didn't know how. I picked the bird up, and held it in my hands, I noticed that around the bird's neck was a tiny medallion. Then I looked down and saw that around my own neck was a tiny medallion....I touched the two medallions together, and at that moment the bird began to sing in a language I understood."

Since the very beginning, my art has involved a personal and universal myth, revealing the animal nature in ourselves and in the world. The animal beings are emissaries and guides. Their eyes invite us into their world. They embody an ongoing connection with the life force and the world.

A lifelong kinship and identification with animals has helped me to express what it is to be here as a flesh and blood being. Since my earliest work in the 1980s, I have explored the interaction between the animal nature, both "wild" and "tame," and the human psyche. Mysterious and intimate characters act within an inner landscape, similar to dreams.

My paintings and sculpture involve personal feelings of various states of empowerment, and express the similar states and plight of the animal nature, as the planet and its inhabitants, in the face of extinction, struggle to survive, and want to live.

The focus is both personal and universal. The myth is intuitively known in my body, and is not based on recorded mythology or specific dreams. Instead of illustrating dreams, my work comes from the same place dreams do, similar to “dreamtime.” There is a connection between my body and the various beings in my art.

I work on the floor, which allows my body to be closely related to the art. A metamorphosis occurs as I caress the surface, using pastels and ink on rag paper, or clay. As I rub the surface with my hands, or work with the clay, the animal beings take form, and an intimate connection emerges. Since 1979 I have spoken and sung in Animal Tongues, which I have performed in conjunction with the visual art.

Early memories: ©Jan Harrison 2022

I have always had a deep love of animals and nature. Raised by a single mother in the 1950s, my childhood was solitary. I was fascinated by the worlds discovered in my imagination and by the lush semi-tropics of South Florida, where I was born. I have recollections of imaginary friends, private worlds, and communication with both domestic and feral animals in the neighborhood where I lived. It was a tenuous life, as it was necessary to move often.

Although briefly exposed to traditional religion in my childhood, I was reluctant to connect with it. For example, when I was sent to walk to church on Sundays, I would take a detour, and would go instead to a wild-looking garden, where I would feel empathy with the spiders, lizards, birds, cats, and dogs. These vivid early experiences may be the source of my affinity with deep ecology and ecotheology, but of course I didn’t call it that back then.

Feeling a great connection with the natural world, I would disconnect from the dysfunctional events around me, and uncover mysterious animal-connected worlds. The visions I experienced then would include animals and humans communicating with each other, expressing what they loved and feared in the world. Characters would perform rituals, which involved dancing, or clapping hands, and the animals would wave their tails around in a curvilinear motion.

The scenarios were of humans being guided and assisted by animals, the wisdom of animals, their joy and strength, as well as their plight, persecution, and suffering.

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