

The Haudenosaunee are a league of six indigenous American tribes, formerly called the Iroquois. Tony Filipovitch led us in their Thanksgiving Prayer in November. Our reading today comes from their Thanksgiving Prayer for Animals:

**We gather our minds together to send greetings and thanks to all the Animal life in the world. They have many things to teach us as people. We see them near our homes and in the deep forests. We are glad they are still here and we pray that this will always be so.
Now our minds are one.**

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato January 31, 2021 Sermon: A Blessing of the Animals

These opening words are from Rev. LoraKim Joyner.

There is this guy who saves for years to buy his dream car. He finally shells out a fortune for a brand new Lamborghini. Recognizing the deeply felt significance of attaining his lifelong dream, he drives to a nearby Catholic Church and knocks on the parsonage door. "Father, I was wondering whether you'd be willing to say a blessing on my Lamborghini." "Certainly, my son," replies the priest, "but what's a Lamborghini?" "Sorry to have troubled you, father--I just have a feeling you're not the right person for the job." The man apologizes and drives to a nearby synagogue where he repeats the question. "Rabbi, I was wondering whether you'd be willing to say a blessing on my Lamborghini." "Certainly," replies the rabbi, "But what's a Lamborghini?" "Gosh, rabbi, I guess you're not the right person for the job, either." So he drives to his local UU meetinghouse and finds the minister. "I was wondering whether you'd be willing to say a blessing on my Lamborghini?" "Certainly," replies the UU minister, "I'd love to have one myself. But what's a blessing?"

If Unitarian Universalists are **not** known for offering blessings in the past, that is now changing. All over the country, UU congregations are doing Animal Blessings. They are quite the storm and people love them.

Those are Rev. Joyner's words. I ask why are these services of blessing animals catching fire? Most UUs have difficulty with the idea that a Divine Power is the source of blessings. We tend not to believe there is supernatural power in uttering certain words. The word "bless" comes from a religious upbringing many of us **left** to become Unitarian Universalists. So why do "A Blessing of the Animals"?

I am a little unusual in the liberal religious crowd. I'm comfortable with religious language to express myself. Many are not, but words like "bless" mean something deep and loving for me in a way that more secular words do not. "Bless" speaks of a connection that dissolves barriers between people, between people and animals. It conveys love and hope without reservation in that moment. Rev. Rita speaks easily of blessing and being blessed. Today, I ask you to think about your connections with beloved pets, with animals in nature around you, with the animals of the interdependent web, and join me in blessing their lives.

I am fascinated by the behavior of animals. By a flock of hundreds of birds flying as one, turning toward the sun at the same second to reveal their silvery underwings shining like slivers of ice. By a fish that throws a clam over and over and over against a rock to break open the shell and eat the mollusk inside. By a backyard squirrel who leaps tree to tree in a flash from branches so thin they look

incapable of supporting a bird. By the squirrel who hurls himself four to five body lengths horizontally to knock seeds from the tube birdfeeder. I am fascinated by migrating monarch butterflies.

These words are from Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer, scientist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. From her book **Braiding Sweetgrass**: “Without the benefit of satellite or microchip, salamanders navigate by a combination of magnetic and chemical signals that herpetologists are just beginning to understand. Part of their direction-finding ability relies on a precise reading of the lines in the earth’s magnetic field. A small organ in the brain processes magnetic data and guides the salamander to its pond. Though many other ponds and vernal pools lie along the route, they will not stop until they arrive at their birthplace, struggling mightily to get there. Once they are close, homing-in salamanders seem to be similar to salmon identifying their home river: they smell their way with a nasal gland on their snouts. Following the earth’s magnetic signals gets them to the neighborhood and then scent takes over to guide them home” (352). The innate abilities of animals extend their perception of the world in ways humans accomplish only by machine and computer.

I have told this story before, but I’m telling it again. Our slender black cat named Sox hopped into a furniture truck that was delivering a table to our house in Idaho. It was several hours before we realized she was missing. I called the store to ask if the driver had seen a cat after leaving us. He had. She had bolted out of the back of the truck when he made his next stop two miles away. I went to that address, where the woman thought the cat had run in the general direction of our house. I checked all the houses in that neighborhood and learned she had climbed onto a roof when a dog went after her. After that, the trail went cold. John and I spent many fruitless hours looking for her.

Three days later, we saw what looked like a cat crawl up our hillside. “Is that Sox?” Bloody, bedraggled, missing chunks of fur, the rest matted, the cat **was** black. Other than that, she was a hungry stray. After 4 days of healing, indeed, it was Sox. She had been in the back of a truck with no windows, walked and run two unfamiliar miles, crossed Interstate 15 (both directions) to crawl up our hillside. How did she know where to go? Magnetic lines and a good nose, apparently.

That knocks **my** socks off. Where in the evolutionary parade did that part of the brain disappear before humans came along? Do some people have it? How does it feel physically to get information from the earth’s magnetic lines? And by the way, what **ELSE** can my cat perceive that I have no awareness of?

I have watched a video of Wounda, one of Jane Goodall’s chimps, being released into a preserve after being nursed from near death. Jane and other caretakers stand by Wounda’s cage as the chimp strides out and toward the vegetation, stops, turns around, and lopes back to receive hugging and petting. Jane makes no movement, but says something to Wounda, who then clasps Jane in a 16-second full-body hug, hanging her head on one side of Jane’s neck and then the other, before finally taking off. Their attachment is genuine, dissolving boundaries between species, loving the life in each other. To what do we attribute the strong bonds between animals and people? Does such an attachment happen between chimps and humans because we share 98% of our DNA with chimpanzees?

Well, DNA does not explain some of the videos of dramatic connections between animals and their human caregivers you may have seen online.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that a penguin from Patagonia had washed up on a shore in Brazil, 2000 miles away. Near death, it was emaciated and covered in oil. A man named DeSouza washed and fed the penguin back to health. Jinjing, the penguin, disappears for up to four months at a time to swim to breeding grounds, but always returns to DeSouza’s home to follow him around like a dog and nuzzle him. They take walks on the beach together, swim together and eat together. The **Journal** writes, quoting the man: “I love him like it is my own **child**, and I believe the penguin loves me.”

A 73-year-old man in northern Finland participated in a study of carnivores. When he was asked afterward if he would adopt some bear cubs that had been orphaned, he cared for them first in his home and then outside as they grew. He lives with them as if they were outdoor dogs. At 1,000 pounds each, they lick his face and hands.

In the year 1997, the *New York Times* reported on rancher and biologist Kent Clegg, who lived about 75 miles from us in Idaho. He wanted to do something about whooping crane recovery by reintroducing the birds to territory they had once occupied. He raised a flock of juvenile whooping cranes and sandhill cranes. As their surrogate mother he trained them to follow him everywhere, including into the skies to make their necessary fall migration to breeding grounds. He piloted an ultralight aircraft, leading them 700 miles to New Mexico to land in a nature refuge on the Rio Grande River, where a colony of cranes were breeding. The next spring, the whoopers and sandhills returned to Idaho on their own to raise their chicks. I saw many articles online that said the same thing has been happening in Wisconsin with ultralight planes leading whooping cranes. These strong connections between people and birds owe their success, not to DNA, but to imprinting.

It happens when humans have cared for big cat orphan cubs. On youtube, you can watch full-grown lions leaping into the arms of their early human caregivers whom they have not seen for many years. Even some lions who are living in the wild and suddenly recognize their early caretaker break into a run to fully embrace with legs and front paws. They rub their necks again and again on the human's shoulders and face, tongue licking the person's hands and face. The connection formed as a cub became a permanent part of who that animal is.

Alex, the grey African parrot worked with his university trainers for 30 years. Because they needed Alex to do many, many repetitions of a task to show the statistical significance of his number and color comprehension, he would often become bored. He had already done the task **over and over** again.

Dr. Irene Pepperberg of Brandeis University, one of Alex's trainers, said the parrot would be interested and consider learning a task a game the first couple dozen times, but after that it was harder to get him to cooperate. Alex would turn his back and refuse to respond, he would use his beak to push all the items off his tray and onto the floor. When she asked him again to identify the colors on a tray, he would sometimes tell her the names of all the colors that were NOT on the tray, apparently just to be contrary. One day Alex had had it with old games. At their one work session per day, Dr. Pepperberg asked what color had three items on a tray full of differently colored items. She asked Alex, "What color is three?" He said "Five." "No," she said, "What color is three?" He said "Five." "OK, Smartie," she said, "What color is five?" He said, "NONE." And he was correct.

What does this lead us to ask about animals? Do they have a self, a sentient presence? Are they as different from one another as humans are? When we listen, when we pay close attention, when we go beneath the outer features of an animal, is there a being present, not a human presence, but an **individual**? I suggest that careful, in-depth work with animals reveals there is. Your relationship with your different pets tells you there is. Henry Panowitsch tells me animals are as different from one another as people are. To quote Henry: "The only commonality is their differences. **Each** is different. We must look with empty eyes, no preconceptions, to see they are."

As we know, not all is sweetness and light in our connections with animals. Nature is red in tooth and claw. Although innocent, some animals can be ferocious and terrifying. Killing and eating are a part of their nature, just as caring and bonding are. This is the way of life. We also must acknowledge that some animals are raised for food to sustain us. Not everyone eats meat or poultry or fish, but most in

the world do. It has been a way of life since the beginning. We have overfished and overhunted, helped ourselves to so much land that animals have nowhere to go. **We have to do better.** We must expand natural ecosystems, restore life-giving habitat, pray the Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Animals.

We fall head over heels in love with some animals, our precious pets. Is it the innocence, the unconditional love on the part of the pet, the companionship, the calm we feel relaxing in a room together? All of this and more motivate us to go to the animal shelter and ask, "Which one?" Once I came home with three. Watch what happens to a person when their pet is taken to them in the hospital or nursing home. Researchers tell us pets relieve depression, anxiety and stress and increase oxytocin levels. Especially in older people and those battling mental illness, they reduce loneliness and isolation and let us know we are needed. You can talk to to a pet. They are part of the family.

Now it is time to bring your pets close to you and the camera if they are willing. Bring your thoughts of wild and domestic animals who fascinate you. With gratitude, we offer all up to be thanked and blessed on their life's journey. When you are ready, type into the Chat the names of your pets, or if you have no pets, the names of one or two species that capture your imagination. I will read the names aloud.

I will begin for John and me and our camera-shy cat.

Bless you, Agent 11. As with all the animals who follow in the Chat, may you live long, love your life, and have the space you need.

Bless you,

Bless all who have been brought for us to see and imagine. For your life, your innocence, your uniqueness, companionship and love, from our hearts we bless and cherish you. May we intently listen, to understand who you are, and may we care wisely for all the creatures of the earth.

Blessed be, may it be so, and may the people say "Amen."