

Our Animal Teachers

Sermon on Job 12:7-10 & Proverbs 30:24-32

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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“Ask the animals, and they will teach you...”

Humans may be concerned about animal rights, but who would have thought an animal could teach human rights? Well, a fluffy white dog named Amelia has been teaching at the Amnesty International offices. About a year ago, Lee, one of the staff, came to my husband Bob with an unusual request. Could she bring a dog to work with her every day? Lee wanted to foster a pup who would become a life companion for an autistic child. The training process to socialize this helper dog required that Amelia be with Lee or her partner all the time, accompanying her humans into every sort of life situation. Thus Amelia became the Amnesty dog. I met her on International Human Rights day. We had a fond pat before she curled up under Lee’s chair, with one ear to our letter-writing conversation.

Bob is ‘a dog person,’ so he expected that Amelia’s presence would change the atmosphere at the office, but he has been surprised by how much difference one dog has made. He was telling me the other morning how “People drop into Lee’s office to pat Amelia as they come and go, so there are more conversations. Amelia greets us all with the same enthusiasm. She crosses the lines of our formal office roles and we all enter our humanness. Her presence has changed the office culture. The dog softens us.”

For many among us modern urbanites, as for farm people, dogs are often the closest of God’s creatures to us. And dogs are so generous in relationships. For little more than table scraps, walks and the pleasure of our presence, they offer unguarded love, loyalty, empathy and endless forgiveness. At our house we joke about wishing we had the energy and enthusiasm for each other at the end of the day, that our dog Jessi has for each of us, when we come in the door. You know that tail wagging

delight? I once saw a man in a T-shirt that read: “I want you to love me like my dog loves me.” Well fella, I thought, nobody is ever likely to love you like your D.O.G - except your G.O.D!

We can learn a lot about love and relationships- the stuff of spirituality- from canine companions. Cindy Stone, a psychotherapist in Toronto, wrote a book called “The Incidental Guru: Lessons in Healing From A Dog.” When she was badly bitten by her newly acquired dog Harry, she took up the challenge to keep him and learn to live with him in spite of her fear. With the help of a trainer, she faced healing their relationship. She set out to help Harry recover his innate capacities for courage, trust, respect and love...and along the way, developed her own.

While hoping to heal Harry, Cindy strengthened her own relationship skills. She overcame her fear of the dog who bit her, learned to behave in a more consistent and trustworthy manner and discovered how to respect the dog’s boundaries - and her own. Out of the growing courage, trust and respect in their relationship, came mutual love between Cindy and Harry. This psychologist eventually recognized how her discoveries about healing a human-dog relationship, apply to human-human ones too.

God’s creatures have so much to teach us. In the Proverbs reading, ants and badgers, locusts and lizards are wise teachers about power relationships; they illustrate what is real might and unreal hubris. Clearly the pride of the lion is more stately than the strutting pride of the human king. What lessons can we learn from even the smallest creatures?

Job, amidst his trials says: “The hand of the Lord is the life of every living thing and every human being.” He takes in all the animal evidence of God’s wisdom and strength, recommending we do the same: “The birds of the air will tell you...the fish of the sea will declare to you.”

Latin American liberation theologian Leonardo Boff wrote: “Every creature is a

messenger of God and God's representative, as well as sacrament. Every one is worthy and is to be accepted and listened to as such. We should see the Creation as the mirror of God."

Have you had an animal messenger in your life? An animal teacher? Perhaps a bird at your feeder who taught you to greet the day? A heron by the river who showed you how to be still and know God's presence? A cat who softened your anxious edges? An eagle who inspired you to soar?

Native spiritualities have always recognized the role of 'spirit animal' in human learning and development. Youth on their 'spirit quest' right of passage out in the woods await the appearance of a creature from whom they are meant to learn - to whom they 'listen' for qualities they can develop. A creature who will communicate with them from the Creator.

Our Christian relationship with the creatures has not always been so respectful. Environmentalists today point to the dangerous words in our Judeo-Christian creation myth as the root of an exploitative relationship with the animal world. We who have thought God gave us 'dominion over all beasts of the field and birds of the air,' have often only appreciated them for what they can do for us, rather than for what they teach us.

We can extol the virtues of dogs who can amazingly sniff out their master's cancers - before a scan can. We can love a bird for singing beautifully to us or for being our 187th species. We can value a horse for offering us a galloping high or a goat as the source of delicious cheese. But the spiritual learnings in human-animal relations go much deeper than what they give and we take.

To be in right relationship, with animals as with people, we need to appreciate them for just being. In any loving relationship, we do best when we just accept and admire each other for our differences, co-habiting in mutual respect,interdependent.

Humans are coming to understand at last, that we need to be in right relationship with all the life forms of Creation, to keep our earth Ark afloat. Though the bee may seem insignificant compared to our ‘intelligent life form,’ the bee has its essential place. With our bees in decline, the prospects for pollinating our food crops are poor. So we look on the bee with new respect, appreciating at last its right to habitat in the fields and in our gardens.

Gradually we are learning to relinquish “dominion over” the animals in favour of ‘stewardship,’ protection and appreciation of those creaturely beings in whom and with whom we must build mutual respect and trust. We humans are gradually giving up our hubris in relation to creatures. We are repenting for taking license over the animals and thus setting the balance of creation on earth, on such a precarious edge.

Today’s scriptures illustrate that its important for us to get beyond what we get from animals, to truly receive what they have to teach us. Sally McFague, a well known eco-theologian at the Vancouver School of Theology, encourages Christians to practise loving the natural world for its intrinsic value and thereby break the hold of our ecologically and spiritually dangerous, ego-centric ways. We can do this by simply paying attention to something other than ourselves - to something in the natural world.

McFague quotes British novelist Iris Murdoch on how helpful it is for us humans to get over ourselves -get out of our selves - by getting into nature. Murdoch observes that “to really pay attention to the ‘other’ is difficult and contrary to how we usually see the world, which is...in terms of our fat, relentless ego.” But when we do let nature teach us that it is not all about ‘me,’ we are freed.

Murdoch gives this personal example: “I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, brooding perhaps on some damage to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. There is nothing but a kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter, it

seems less important. There is a natural and proper part of us, that takes a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer, alien, pointless, independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees.”

As far as I know, there is no bird who sings like the human “me, me, me”. Rather, the birds of creation have taught us to sing together “we, we, we.” Like we do in our hymns, recognizing our humble place in God’s community of all life.

Let us pay attention to the creatures and learn from them. What more will they teach us? How to survive as a species? Let us learn to just be with them. Let us learn animal rights that we might better practise courage, trust, respect, love and human rights as well.

In the words of the 19th century poet Christina Rossetti:

“The tiniest living thing
That soars on feathered wing,
Or crawls among the long grass out of sight,
Has just as good a right
To its appointed portion of delight
As any king.”

This past week, Amelia the dog finished her term at Amnesty. Soon she’ll be moving into a classroom to teach her life lessons to children. May they all recognize a messenger from their Creator in her fluffy, faithful presence.

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