

**Animals**  
February 22, 2009  
Mark Belletini

**Opening Words**

We are here  
*as the cold flurries of winter fly once again*  
to worship, to celebrate our deep bond  
*to all things living, and, as well,*  
to respond to the call of both past and future  
*in the present moment of love and wisdom.*

**And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.**

**Sequence** *The Sequence today is something I did not write, but comes from the works of Sri Chinmoy, the late Bangladeshi spiritual teacher in the Hindu traditions. I ran across it by accident (although the psychologist Jung would probably say it was sheer synchronicity), and it was simply too wonderful not to use at this place in the order.*

Once there lived a pious man in Bangladesh. Every day a great scholar would come to his house and read aloud from the scriptures: the Upanishads *and* the Vedas. The master of the house listened devotedly to these readings, and the scholar's commentary. Now the family had a bird called Krishna. It was kept in a cage in the room where the scholar gave the talks, and the pious man heard them.

One day the bird spoke to its master and said, "Could you please tell me what benefit you derive from these spiritual talks?"

The master answered, "Krishna, you don't seem to understand that these spiritual talks will liberate me, free me from bondage!"

The bird said, "You have been listening to these talks for the last few years, but I don't see any changes in you. Would you kindly ask your teacher what will actually happen to you?"

On the following day the master of the house said to his teacher, "Guru, I have been listening to your spiritual talks for the last ten years. Is it true that I will get liberation and freedom?"

The teacher was still. He scratched his head, pondered the question, but found no reply. He remained silent for about an hour and then left the house.

The master of the house was stunned. His teacher could not give an answer to the bird's question. But the bird found an answer.

From that day on, the bird stopped eating. It stopped singing. It became absolutely silent. The master and his family placed food inside the cage every day, but the bird would not touch anything.

One day the master looked at the bird and, seeing no sign of life in it, took it gently out of the cage. With a sad heart, he placed his Krishna on the floor. In a twinkling, the bird flew away into the infinite freedom of the sky!

The bird taught. Its master and his teacher learned: silence can liberate.

### *silence*

Liberation is not always flying away.  
Sometimes it's turning and facing  
without flying away.  
And so, in liberty, we turn our mind's  
inner eye toward those we love and  
those we miss, and those we find  
harder to love; we see their faces within,  
say their names into the liberating silence,  
or keep them safeguarded in our heart of hearts.

### *naming*

Love's philosophy is broad and wide.  
From the tiny cricket to the mighty blue whale,  
from the prickly cactus to the bobbing quail,  
from each to each, love sings.

## **Readings**

**The First Reading** comes from the Scroll of Bemidbar, the fourth book in the Hebrew Torah, which was set down in final written form after centuries of oral recitation around 2500 years ago. In the Greek/English scripture, it's called the Book of Numbers.

The Moavite people were afraid. The Moavite elders said to each other, "Here comes that hoard of Israelites who will lick clean all our whole land. They hide the plains from view, they are so numerous. So the king of Moab called on Balaam, a fellow from the Euphrates area well-versed in divination and curses, and they hired him to place a curse on the Israelite settlers.

In the morning, Balaam saddled his donkey, and took off to do the bidding of the elders of Moav. As he was riding along, the donkey caught sight of a messenger from the Eternal standing in the road with a sword, blocking the way. So the donkey took off sideways and trotted into the fields. Balaam beat the donkey hard with a stick to try and get it to go the right way.

So the Eternal's messenger came into the field and stood blocking the donkey's path, down there by the walls of the local vineyard. Again Balaam took the stick to the donkey.

This time the donkey went off toward the stone wall, and scraped Balaam's foot against the stones. Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with force. Finally, the messenger blocked the Balaam and his donkey completely, on a narrow path, so there was no way to go either right or left. At this point, the donkey just lay down under Balaam and refused to budge. Then the Eternal opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have beaten me so hard three times?"

"You have made a fool of me. If I had a sword I would kill you!" said Balaam to the donkey. And the donkey said, "You have been riding me all of my life, and have I ever done any of these things before?" And he answered "No." And at that point, the messenger became visible to Balaam, and asked him, "Why have you treated this animal so? If this animal had not shied away from me as it did, I would have taken your life, because what you are doing is obnoxious to me."

**The Second Reading** *is a remarkable poem by the New Zealand born English poet Fleur Adcock. It's called For a Five-Year-Old*

A snail is climbing up the window-sill  
into your room, after a night of rain. You call me in to see, and I explain that it would be unkind to leave it there: it might crawl to the floor; we must take care that no one squashes it. You understand, and carry it outside, with careful hand, to eat a daffodil.

I see, then, that a kind of faith prevails: your gentleness is molded still by words from me, who have trapped mice and shot wild birds, from me, who drowned your kittens, who betrayed your closest relatives, and who purveyed the harshest kind of truth to many another. But that is how things are: I am your mother, and we are kind to snails.

## **Sermon**

I saw this week that the Columbus Zoo was just voted the best in the nation. Even the venerable San Diego zoo is not as honored.

I'm not sure what criteria were used to establish this honor. Jack Hanna certainly gets a lot of credit, and they bring up the water park, the golf course and other local features, but those don't really have anything to do with animals as far as I can tell. I know there are 7000 animals in the zoo and aquarium, but again, I am not sure if that counts ALL the fish, or all the insects.

My friend Tom Ace had a friend who was the chief veterinarian for another zoo, one that didn't even make the list, the San Francisco zoo. But, this fellow got us in behind the scenes some years ago, and so I was actually able to see a zoo from a different perspective. I got to feed some of the animals...a koala, a rhino and a giraffe. We offered the giraffe leafy acacia branches. The giraffe bent its long neck, and then wrapped its tongue around the branches almost like a tentacle, stripping the leaves off as neat as can be. The thing that amazed me more than anything, however, was the color of the giraffe's

tongue. It was blue. I mean blue. I don't mean bluish, or almost blue. I mean blue. Blue as distant mountains on a sunny afternoon. Blue as some stained glass is blue.

It seemed so alien, so unexpected. I remembered myself feeling startled by this totally alien creature up close, so wondrously tall and patterned, but so different from the dogs and cats I experience with greater familiarity.

And then there was the time I first milked a cow. Me. A city-boy from Motown, who thought milk came from cartons. I was in Chile on my second sabbatical. I volunteered to make a festive welcoming dish of home-made ravioli for some family guests, who were flying all the way in from Africa that weekend.

I gathered the wheat from the field and took it to the mill to make flour. But then I needed cheese. I needed butter. When you are on a farm in the middle of a rather effective nowhere, and the nearest store is an hour and half away, you make your own cheese, your own butter. Beginning of course, by milking your own cow.

Now the very idea of city-boy milking a cow caused a great deal of amusement among the farmhands. They placed bets on whether or not I could do it, I found out later. But once in the barn, I watched the calf come and grab one of the teats on the udder of the cow with strength, and yank very hard indeed. They called this priming the pump. I noticed that the calf was not gentle. I noticed the cow was apparently no delicate thing. So when they sat me down on the stool, and placed the bucket under the udder, I knew I had to use common sense even though it chafed against my intuition. Thus, I grabbed hold and used the same rough strength as the calf, and lo and behold. fresh warm milk.

I tell you truly, if anyone tugged at my arm the way I yanked at the teats on that udder, I would reactively belt you one so hard I'd send you flying. But the cow just stood there, content as could be.

But both the giraffe and the cow taught me something. Although I know that I too am an animal on this earth, a mammal among mammals, a primate, I really experienced myself as *very, very* different from those animals I got to know up close. That blue tongue, like a Martian tentacle. The different sensitivity to what I imagined *had* to be pain. And, ever see a spider up close? Or a lobster? Truly alien.

The various species on the earth are different from us a lot on the surface. Different colors, different numbers of limbs, different ways of locomotion, different ways of seeing, different diets, different ways of protection, relating, and aggression.

And yet....and yet....they speak. Many species of animals do communicate with others in their species. Take birds, for example. They do speak...and I am not talking about the mimicry of parrots here, or mynahs. But I am talking crows, and gulls, birds like that. They actually speak. Maybe not in English or Bangladeshi. But they have distinct languages. In fact, French gulls cannot understand the language of North American gulls. Yet some ocean birds close to France can understand them, and their dialects. Bird

language, which we often call birdsong, even enables certain birds, canary hens, for example, to build their nests with speed. Canary birds deprived of hearing take three times as long to figure out the complex structures of their nests as do those who can hear the chirping nest-building poem. Birds warn each other, teach each other, assemble each other, all with a variety of languages. Even chickens, who are not known for their brilliance, have over 30 distinct arrangements of clucks to communicate a sophisticated collection of orders and warnings.

Bees communicate. Ants too, using chemical languages. Some spiders use visual communication, via their webs. And like us, spiders can suffer from chemical changes in the brain introduced by ingested substances. Under the influence of caffeine, the same caffeine in our coffee, for instance, spiders produce jagged webs without beauty or symmetry. Even earth-worms speak to one another in small high pitched voices which we cannot hear except with remarkable equipment. And there are over ten thousand species of singing insects who use leg vibrations and such to communicate clear messages across the air.

Now, of course, when you heard the story of Balaam's donkey this morning, you heard a story of an animal speaking in a *human* language. This ancient folktale is not to be taken literally, as, in fact, no part of the scripture can honestly be taken literally without giving up the critical approach we use for everything else important in our lives. Like an Aesop's fable, which also uses animals to make a point, the story of the talking donkey makes two assertions...animals are often more sensitive to what's going on around them than angry, over-confident human beings, like Balaam; and two, animals suffer at the hands of human beings. "What have I done to you that you have beaten me so hard three times?" says the donkey with clarity. What may not be apparent is that the messenger seen by the donkey may have also appeared as a sort of animal. Human beings, who often seem to think they are the center of the universe, have historically depicted the divine messengers found in Bible stories, angels or cherubim, as human beings like themselves, albeit with wings and a halo. But on the cover of your orders, you will see what a cherub actually is...not some cute little child with wings and rosy cheeks, as in most western illustrations, or a robed blond, but a sphinx, a creature combining the wings of the bird, the torso of a lion, a hu-man head, but often showing a snake for a tail.

The ancient world often combined animal and human characteristics in their spiritual art, perhaps as a way of saying what we say in fancy English when we talk about the "interdependence" of all living things. Egyptian gods and goddesses with the heads of hippos and birds, the winged Greek sphinx talking to Oedipus while crouching like a lion, the animal visions of the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel...all of these seem to understand that human animals and the non-human animals are *inextricably* bound up with each other.

In the famous story of Noah's Ark, the animals are necessary to human salvation...all of them. The famous Ark of the Covenant had two sphinxes on its lid, and was placed in the temple between two giant sphinxes with lion bodies and eagle wings. Similar sphinxes made up of combined human and non-human animal features, guarded the gates of great

Babylon, Nineveh, Hattusas and other famous cities. Even in Rome, you would immediately be greeted, in ancient times, as now, with the image of a mother wolf giving suck to the founders of the city, the children Remus and Romulus. Animals in ancient times, it would appear, were not only caught up with human culture, but with the very idea of the sacred. The original natives of this land often expressed their idea of the sacred... with animals: the wolf, the eagle, even the mouse serving as holy symbols to the Lakota and other nations.

And in our own era, the Jain religion in India so respects the lives of animals that, not only do they practice a vegan diet, the most devout among them famously sweep the streets where they walk to avoid stepping on insects, and wear cloth over their mouths to avoid the accidental inhalation of a gnat.

At the other pole of such devotion to animal welfare, we have folks in the United States ridiculing certain cultures in India for revering cows, or making fun of vegetarians or vegans, or even turning up their noses at the peasant and rural poverty cultures around the world... Chinese, Italian, Native American, Polish, Mexican, African... who, when they kill an animal for food, use every single bit of the animal... including inner organs, skin and the blood, so as not to waste one molecule of this precious creature whose life has been taken.

But most of us, I'd like to suggest this morning, are more like the mother in Fleur Adcock's poem. We are somewhere in between the two poles. We understand her lovely response to her son, hunching over him tenderly to protect the snail from harm, feeling moved by his faith in her ability to love; but, she reminds us, she has drowned kittens, trapped mice, and she even claims to have shot small birds.

She has a capacity for tenderness thriving side by side her capacity to take the lives of creatures. And in this culture too, most of us can show tenderness to pets, who sometimes are clearly precious members of our family, and yet can eat pepperoni on a pizza the very next minute. A vegetarian might swat a mosquito without a thought. A man who prefers elk steaks from an animal he shot in South Dakota may be the most loving friend imaginable to his hunting dogs. A woman in the Peace Corps who has been a vegetarian for twenty years may eat a handful of suckling pig to honor the culture of her host family at a wedding, believing that honoring culture trumps her vegetarianism now and then. And even the most devout Jain might accidentally place his elbow down on a gnat that didn't get out of the way fast enough.

Like the mother in the poem, we may be aware of the inconsistencies in our lives surrounding our attitude toward animals. Or we may not be, since lack of awareness about inconsistency is one of the hallmarks of most human cultures, as far as I can tell.

But our Unitarian Universalist living tradition, in every other instance, reminds us that mindfulness about how we *express* our love is one of the spiritual practices that signify our way of life. And in particular, our Universalist side has reminded us for centuries that love can always trump indifference, love can always trump fear, love can always trump

convenience and love always has the power to trump our need to resist, to deny or to avoid. Our religious ancestors thought love was so central, in fact, that they abolished the wicked and arrogant idea of hellfire *after* death, and worked for abolition, women's and other human rights *before* death.

How our capacity to love relates to the other animals with which we share our world may very well be the place where Universalism will show its power today. I am not suggesting that we all become like the Jains, by any means, or some Buddhists. Even Buddhists disagree as to whether Siddhartha's final meal was truffle stew or wild boar stew. I am not even saying that I think everyone "should" become vegan or even vegetarian...although deliberately eating *less* meat at least would demonstrably improve both our own health and the health for the planet. And I do applaud folks who maintain vegan and vegetarian lives, though I personally find such a diet difficult to maintain.

I am mostly just asking this morning that we each get clear on what our *own* attitudes toward animals actually are, and that we then act on that in our lives.

But I do think that if we allowed ourselves to be aware that the animals of earth...with two legs, four legs, six legs, eight legs, no legs, fins, wings, or nothing notable at all, like the lowly tunicate, *can* suffer, we will begin to be truer stewards of our religious tradition. And if we can grow more mindful that their sometimes alien appearance...blue tongues at the zoo, different sensitivities on the farm... does not mean they are unrelated to us and our own joys and suffering, then we may very well write a new chapter in the book of Universalism. Frog Girl in the story this morning recognized that frogs have families too. The Italian genius Giovanni Bernardone, whom we know today as Francis of Assisi, called the birds and wolves in his neighborhood "brothers and sisters." Maybe those metaphors won't work for everyone. But at least Frog Girl and Francis knew what metaphors worked for them, and they lived by those metaphors. What I ask this morning is that we each spend some time in the coming weeks thinking what metaphors, ideas, feelings and images work for us when we describe our relationship to the other animals on earth. After all, love, whatever healthy form it takes, can never be a mistake.

## **Offering**

We set aside this time for members and friends to offer gifts in support of the work of this community. Thank you, whether you give today in the basket, or whether you give by mail or by computer. We thank you. We cannot do this work without your support. And by the way, in a congregation like this, *we* and *you* mean the same thing. We support ourselves. We make it happen. The ushers will now come forward

## **Ceremony of Installation**

New Pastoral Team Members Claire Hagan Bauza, David Carr, Susan Carr, Donna Jarrell, Bill Mills, Sharon Oliver, Nancy van Deusen, Barbara Warner, Jack Wisniewski

Mark introduces, mentions pamphlet, origins

Eric

In the life of a liberal religious congregation, we put people before beliefs, and persons before ceremonies. Being present to each other in both joy and sorrow, rejoicing and suffering is a mark of our religious practice.

The ordained ministers of this church including the Minister Emerita, and our Chaplain, Dick Dawson, embrace among their ministries the pastoral or caring services. In this we are supported and helped by the Caring Committee and the Neighborhood Network, which helps people in time of trouble with meals and rides to and from medical appointments, among many other things.

Mark

To these ministries, the congregation has added the Pastoral Team. The first team was installed seven years ago. Today, we hereby install the new members of our team.

Pastoral Team members extend the care of this congregation to those going through a time of prolonged hardship, grief, hospitalization or loss of work. Know that they each understand confidentiality, promising to keep the sacred stories of every human life safe. They have been trained to do this work, and Eric, Dick and I hereby acknowledge them as persons of character, compassion and commitment, worthy of trust.

Dick

With Eric and Mark, and on behalf of the members of this congregation and its leaders, I hereby install you as members of the Pastoral Team of First Unitarian Universalist Church. Working with the ministers and the Caring Committee and Neighborhood Network to live out our values of compassion and service one-on-one, I commend you to the congregation as servants of the heart.