

First Reading

State of Bliss from *Blessing of the Animals*

By Gary Kowalski

Don't animals teach us about blessing, about joy? They remind us to be satisfied with *what* we have. Not one of them is worried about the stock market. Not one of them wants to run for Congress or govern the animal kingdom. None brags that their religion is better than their neighbor's. Each is satisfied with just a little: fresh water, healthy food, and enough room to nest or den. None needs a passport or travel documents or immigration papers, because they don't live in a state like Arizona or Texas that cares about such things. They live in a state of bliss. **Thus ends the reading.**

Responsive Reading #550 We belong to the Earth attributed to Chief Noah Sealth

L: This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.

R: This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.

L: All things are connected.

R: Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.

L: We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it.

R: Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Second Reading

by Lora Kim Joyner

The new First Principle ... would not tell us how to live, but it would ask us to question how we can live more fully so that others may live well. The First Principle also is not used to judge one another, such as saying "you aren't living up to the principles." Instead all the principles are a call to each of us as congregations, and as individuals, to transform our lives and deepen our religious commitment and sense of spiritual interconnection. Changing the First Principle, then, is to not to dictate our lives or to choose one species or demographic over another, but to find a way to enlarge our hearts and practices so that together we grow our compassionate witness to the world. Each of us is at some point on the continuum of justice, all worthy. It doesn't matter where you start from or where you end up. The goal of our principles is urging us to move joyfully as much as we can further along towards justice through our thoughts, words, and actions. **Thus ends the reading.**

Shared Stories

Video

[Piggy Sue](#)

Message

First Principle Project

Rev Pam Rumancik

"We Give Thanks For The Animals" by Gary Kowalski

We give thanks for the animals
Who live close to nature,
Who remind us of the sanctities of birth and death,
Who do not trouble their lives with foreboding or grief,
Who let go each moment as it passes,
And accept each new one as it comes with serenity and grace.

We can learn a lot from animals; they make our lives better. All the stories we've heard today have born witness to this fact. They make us laugh, sit with us when we're sad, keep us from being lonely, offer unconditional love when we most need it.

There are so many stories of pets who are emotionally attuned to people and who offer comfort and joy through their presence. I found one story of a cat named Thomas who had the run of an inner city nursing home. He could always tell when someone was close to death. He climbed up and who snuggled next to them on the bed and didn't leave until they passed. The nurses said that they could see a peacefulness come into the dying person's face and more than one person spent their final hours with their hand resting on his side.

And another, of a dog named Nala, who spent her days riding up and down elevators in an assisted living home visiting residents and always seemed to know who needed her attention.

My Nana lived with us when I was in high school. All my life she had chided my mom for having too many animals. I can still hear her saying "Dottie (my mom) you need another dog like you need a hole in your head!" Pets were not her thing.

But when she was suffering from Parkinson's disease and spent most of her time in bed, she formed an unlikely (at least from our perspective) relationship with a white kitten named Abigail. Abigail curled up with her on the bed and they spent the entire day together – even though Nana didn't like admitting they were buds. She'd make comments about too many pets and how the cat was bothering her, but if one of us offered to take Abigail out of her room, she'd always say, "no, no, she can stay **this** time." We were smart enough to refrain from pointing out that this time was every time.

It's weird when you think of it - having other species living with us in our homes. That doesn't happen much out in nature, save for those symbiotic species who help each other stay alive. I saw an article the other day on how dogs became domesticated and it seems one theory is related to the fact that dogs make prolonged eye contact with humans. ⁱ Eye contact is a basic form of bonding for mothers and babies. When returning each other's gaze levels of the brain chemical oxytocin rise in humans. When we fall in love, we gaze into our beloved's eyes.

But the interesting thing is that researchers have found this also happens with dogs and humans. When a dog sees its human, its oxytocin levels rise. It experiences that same feeling of being in love that we do. We connect on a deep level with the animals in our lives. So what does all this have to do with our first principle?

Right now the first of our seven principles reads "We the Unitarian Universalist Association of churches covenant to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person." It's a powerful statement but many people, among them folks in the Animal Ministry, believe that it should be expanded even further; the proposed change is that we promote the worth and dignity of every **being**.

Now, many people consider their pets persons. I know Parker, our golden doodle, is a member of the family and no one is going to convince Karen or me otherwise. But what about all animals? Should we respect the worth and dignity of every single living being? Does that mean spiders and centipedes? Does it mean we shouldn't call the exterminator to get rid of ants or yellow jackets? For many the answer is yes.

Practitioners of *Jainism* traditionally known as the Jina sāsana or *Jain*dharma, is one of the oldest Indian religions. It prescribes a path of nonviolence (ahimsa) towards all living beings. ⁱⁱ People on the path of Jainism eat lacto vegetarian diets and will escort insects out of their home rather than killing them. If they perceive dairy animals to be mistreated, they will refrain from partaking of milk products

as well. Jain priests often wear netting over their faces so they do not accidentally inhale tiny insects causing them death.

For many of us this might seem extreme. Nonviolence is a good idea but aren't humans at the top of the food chain? Aren't we by our very nature destined to have dominion over the natural world? All we have to do is take a look around and realize that while this has been the prevailing assumption in the west for several thousand years, but it is not something that really serves us. Dominating the earth has led to imbalance. By killing off insects that are pests to agriculture we have also killed off honey bees and butterflies – which are essential to growing food.

We've found that an economy based on planned obsolescence is destroying our natural habitat; that burning fossil fuels is making the planet we live on inhabitable. We've come to realize that we are not able to see the far reaching consequences of our actions, consequences that may well exterminate the exterminators.

In the western world we trace this idea, at least in part, to the opening books of Genesis.

In Genesis 1:27-30;

²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." ²⁹ And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.

We've thought the world was ours for a very long time – and that we could do what we wanted. But there's a problem with using ancient sacred texts as the undergirding of modern civilization. When that was written, in that particular area of the world, it was very hard to stay alive. This scripture gave people permission to put humans on top of a hierarchy of importance. Survival necessitated putting human interest ahead of other interests.

Now Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion. And liberal religion does not simply mean that we watch Rachel Maddow and listen to NPR – although we might. To be religiously liberal is to constantly reevaluate old teachings in the light of the present moment. It means we look for universal truths but find them differently revealed in each successive generation. It means that revelation is not sealed.

We know so much more about the natural world around us, even as we have become divorced from it in so many ways. We know that elephants bond and will remember one another even after being separated for 30 years or more. We know that whales communicate, that fish use tools, that gorillas can 'talk' to us through sign language and that they develop complex thoughts.

I saw an story about a gorilla who had a favorite movie she liked to watch over and over. But when it came to the sad part of a child being separated from its mother, she would always turn away so she didn't have to watch. She'd make the signs for trouble, sadness, and mother.

Our dogs read our faces to see if we're happy – and will often come and snuggle up when they know we're sad. The more we learn, the more we realize that dairy cows make friends, that elephants mourn,

that chimpanzees form complex social relationships reflecting many of the same emotions and behaviors that we experience. We may be able to speak, but animals have a lot to tell us about how to be in the world. No matter what the last few hundred years have suggested, we are not separate from the rest of nature, but intricately linked in a web of existence that makes us part and parcel of our environment.

There's an old Sufi story that talks about how Sophia, divine wisdom, wanted one aspect of creation to forget that everything is part of a primal unity of being so that it could have the joy of rediscovering this truth. It says that Sophia first approached the mountains and asked if they would forget that they were part of the divine presence but the mountains said 'no way.'

She asked the forests and trees, but they wouldn't even consider it. She asked the insects & the birds but each told her 'no, they could not give up their connection to the whole. She approached the animals and the fish in the sea, but all refused to fall into a dream of forgetfulness. Finally she approached humans, who merely shrugged and said "why not?" We didn't realize what we were giving up – and we only vaguely suspect what we've lost.

This is why we spend the whole of our lives trying to remember; to remember that we are not separate from life but intrinsically woven into the whole of it. A main Sufi practice is called Zikr – which simply means 'to remember.' There is much beautiful teaching around remembering. Re – member. Putting back together that which has been split apart. Reclaiming wholeness. Returning to an understanding of who we are that has been lost. We've come to understand that this idea of humans having dominion over the planet does not serve us. In fact, any domination of one group over another is unhealthy for everyone, even the oppressors.

Patrice Jones, ecofeminist writer, scholar & activist talks about the idea of intersectionality in oppression. She says that we've found that oppression of one group of individuals is always supported and intertwined with oppression and subjugation of other groups. Jones' writes that

“Animals live, suffer, and die in circumstances shaped by human activities. Those human activities are always entangled in social, historical, economic, and cultural processes that are patterned not only by speciesism but also by factors like racism and sexism.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It's impossible to pull out one thread out from the intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, gender bias or even speciesism. All flow from the western idea that there is a hierarchy of value in the world.

An example she gives is looking at the issues facing black women looking for employment. The barriers they face include racial bias and gender bias all mixed together. We can't work on one without acknowledging and working against the totality of bias and oppression in society as a whole. Jones says;

“Social and environmental justice activists must come to understand how speciesism is foundational to intra-species oppression, setting the terms of and helping to maintain the many ways that people exploit each other and the earth.”

She continues, “At the same time, animal advocates must come to understand that every act of abuse or injustice against animals occurs within social and material circumstances that cannot be adequately addressed without an understanding of intersectionality. Injustice for one group is injustice against everyone. This understanding sets up a path for mutual cooperation.

We can see it most clearly in an example Jones' gives of people who work in slaughter houses. Human beings have to shut down a part of themselves and close off that which recognizes a kinship with the animals that they are killing in order to be able to do such gruesome work. This shutting down in one area of their lives leads to higher levels of abuse and domestic violence in their family life. Workers in these industries have much higher incidents of domestic abuse than in other industries which are similarly situated economically.

The choices we make in one area of our lives has an impact on others. We cannot close off parts of our psyches without suffering real loss in other areas. How do we 'wake up' to the things that have been shut down? Find the hidden wholeness that is within us waiting to be reborn? Walking in nature is something that almost everyone finds restorative. Petting an animal; interacting with wilderness, looking up at a night sky.

Why does being in nature and with animals make most of us feel so good? Because it takes us back to the primal experience of being connected. We are not above nature, outside of it. We are intrinsically woven within it. When we remember that, we remember our whole selves. We feel restored to our original state of blessing, of divinity.

Rev Milspaugh wrote: "All too often, we pace the geometries of our walled gardens, believing we are traversing the whole of creation." This smallness does not serve us. It leaves us isolated, small, ineffectual. It creates the illusion of individuality at the expense of the connection that fuels our lives. One of my favorite bumper stickers is "We are spiritual beings having a physical experience." We live with in this illusion of separation from one another, but at the deepest core of our being even science tells us, when we peer into the hearts of atoms, we find a vastness of space which is the base of everything we experience.

The First Principle project is asking us to make visible these interconnections. It urges us to 're member' to acknowledge that all beings are interconnected and interdependent. That what happens to one of us, happens to all of us.

We celebrate our animals today, our love of them, their relationships with us. We are grateful for the gifts of unconditional love that they bring and for the way we remind us of our better nature. How they help us to be our deepest and truest selves.

The Buddhist tradition has a loving kindness meditation for each of us. I invite you to say it with me:

May I be peaceful.

May I be happy.

May I be well.

May I be safe.

May I be free from suffering.

May all beings be peaceful.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be well.

May all beings be safe.

May all beings be free from suffering.

Amen & Blessed be.

ⁱ <http://www.livescience.com/50509-dogs-use-human-bonding.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jainism>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://blog.bravebirds.org/archives/1553>