



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“The More Than Human World”

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I have a confession to make. On this Sunday when we celebrate and bless all the animals that enrich our lives and create the vital energy of our entire planet, I have to tell you that the first time I blessed an animal was not a particularly auspicious occasion.

In college, a friend of mine adopted a cat. One weekend evening, as a group of us gathered for yet another semi-raucous party in my friend’s apartment, I indulged in adult beverages (legally!) to the point where I felt like I had The Best Idea Ever, which was: to baptize my friend’s kitten. When I said this out loud, enough of my friends - most importantly, the friend who had chosen to take responsibility for this young cat’s life - also thought it was a pretty great idea. We semi-raucously located the kitten, perhaps four or five months old at this point and not entirely fond of being held still, and we semi-raucously gathered in a cluster around the bathroom, where the sink would serve as our baptismal font. The kitten was squirmy, but fortunately baptism doesn’t take long, if one cuts right to the chase. I cupped a little bit of water in my right hand as I held the kitten with my left, and as I said the words of baptism from my Roman Catholic upbringing, I gently dribbled the water onto the cat’s head. He shook it off quite promptly and gave another squirm, and I set him down gently, none the worse for wear.

Now I don’t tell this story to suggest that anyone should baptize their own pet, at least not the way I did it. The reason this tale is inauspicious - even though it did the cat no harm, and he went on to live a good long and healthy life - is because I did it as a joke. I used the language of baptism, which is a sacred rite for many people, to get some quick laughs. And because I was joking, I didn’t

have any sense of what an act of blessing would mean in my own heart. The Roman Catholic rite of baptism uses the language of the Trinity - the baptism made in the "name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" - and is actually one Catholic sacrament that is permitted to be performed by anyone, not an ordained clergyperson. Because baptism is required in infancy in the Catholic tradition, all people are empowered to bless, so that a baby in peril may have its immortal soul protected in the event of mortal danger. Although I was no longer Catholic when I baptized my friend's cat, I felt some guilt over making a mockery of what can truly be a sacred act.

I have said it many times - in our tradition, anyone can bless. But I invite us all to consider the state of our own hearts when we undertake a blessing. Poet, priest, and mystic John O'Donohue has this to say about blessing: "It would be lovely if we could rediscover our power to bless one another. I believe each of us can bless. When a blessing is invoked, it changes the atmosphere. Some of the plenitude flows into our hearts from the invisible neighborhood of loving kindness. In the light and reverence of blessing, a person or situation becomes illuminated in a completely new way. In a dead wall a new window opens, in dense darkness a path starts to glimmer, and into a broken heart healing falls like morning dew. It is ironic that so often we continue to live like paupers though our inheritance of spirit is so vast. The quiet eternal that dwells in our souls is silent and subtle; in the activity of blessing it emerges to embrace and nurture us. Let us begin to learn how to bless one another. Whenever you give a blessing, a blessing returns to enfold you."

That's what was missing the first time I blessed an animal: light and reverence. Of course it was done in love and a spirit of fun, which are not antithetical to blessing. But from this distant remove, I have a greater sense of how much I had to learn about blessing.

Once again the cycle of life as represented by the cycle of the planet's water has put a literal damper on our actual planned animal blessing today. But we can all touch that generosity within our own hearts to bless all animals, everywhere - as well as our own beloved companion animals. Shortly, I will

share the blessing I would have used at our blessing ceremony, so that you can hold it within your heart and share it with any animals you love when you get a chance.

And I also want to take a moment today to think about, to praise and honor and bless, the animals we maybe don't love. Or maybe, more precisely, the animals we don't give our attention to. The animals that are out of sight, out of mind - ones so tiny, or so impossibly distant and remote from us, that they never become a part of our consideration, no matter how vital they are. Nor is it a requirement for an animal to be vital to be worthy of blessing. Right now, in a river somewhere in a land not inhabited by humans, there's a little fish swimming, unknown and unnoticed by us, or possibly even by any other living creatures. That little fish is just as worthy of blessing as the fish that might live in your aquariums at home, as the fish that you might catch and release when you are relaxing by the lake, or the fish that might provide life-giving sustenance to you.

This is what I love about our reading today - it names all manner of animals, even worms and insects that often aren't what come to mind when we think of blessing animals. Each creature in the world, no matter what we know or don't know, what we think or don't think about them - matters. In part I say this because so much about life here on our own planet remains a mystery. A huge part of being human, for instance, relies on the existence of our own microfauna - the gut biome that is so vital to human health, made of trillions of tiny beings in symbiotic relationships with us in our own digestive tract. We've thought a lot about a tiny being indeed - a virus - in recent years, but there are countless tiny lives that perform functions not only beneficial to us but also necessary for our own survival and thriving.

From our reading:

"You Worms of the Earth,

Ants, Beetles, Spiders and Centipedes

You are the essential but oft-forgotten strand in nature's web.

Through you the cycle is complete;

through you new life arises from old.
Remind us of our humility.
For the wheel of life does not turn around us;
we are not the axle, but merely spokes
no less than unseen, unknown and shunned companions
such as yourselves.”

We are not the axle, merely spokes. All life is vital, and none the less so for the shortcomings of our own understanding. All life is part of the cycle of life and death and rebirth that sustains all of us on the planet.

Last week I talked a little bit about the ways the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism re-examines its own deepest values and the principles upon which our faith stands, acknowledging that all living things must change. One idea I have heard several times is a proposal to combine our First and Seventh principles. Our First Principle is we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; our Seventh Principle is we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The way it was reframed to combine those two was this: “We covenant to affirm, promote, and respect the inherent worth and dignity of the interdependent web of all existence and all beings that live within it.”

When we acknowledge the many gifts and blessings we receive from animals, many of us think first and most lovingly of companion animals that share our lives and homes. Especially during the first years of the pandemic, when isolation was its own endemic condition, animals gifted us with huge amounts of joy. Even if we didn't live with pets ourselves, we saw them in the background on Zoom calls with our friends, we watched videos of them on the internet, and we smiled to watch our neighbors out walking their dogs, who didn't seem to notice that anything was amiss.

In the spirit of blessing, of the nurturing that flows from wells deep within us, I will share now a few words of the blessing I would have led us in for companion animals brought to the grounds. This blessing is adapted from a

blessing originally written by the Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig. Today we'll do this in the form of a brief guided meditation, so I invite you to get comfortable in your seats, close your eyes or soften your focus, and sit in silence for a moment before we begin. [pause]

“Humans, let's breathe deeply ...

And place your hands gently on your heart

Imagine [how]

Love flows into you, up from the earth, down from the stars.

Flowing easily into your heart,

Until your heart is full....

Now let that love spill over and flow into your hands,

until you feel them full of love, too....

Still breathing love into your heart,

And with your hands overflowing with love,

Place your gentle hands on your animal friends.

Imagine your love flowing into them.

Or just set your hands down on your chair,

and imagine all that love flowing into the animals you love.

Imagine it flowing into all the animals you don't yet know, that you may never know.

Now please repeat after me to these animals:

I bless you. [I bless you.]

I love you. [I love you.]

I thank you for being exactly who you are. [I thank you for being exactly who you

are.]

May I be a blessing to you, [May I be a blessing to you,]

As you are a blessing to me. [As you are a blessing to me.]”

Now take a last few gentle breaths. I hope you take the time to love and appreciate an animal today, and no matter what silliness they get up to, no matter how squirmy they get, may you give and receive the blessing of love for all the richness of animal lives.