

The Interconnected Web

UU Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on Theme by Sue Oshiro-Zeier:

My life has been enriched by 3 dogs which came from rescue shelters. The first dog, Coco, a Labrador mix, was adopted at 3 months of age and needed lots of love, a typical puppy. She grew up to be a patient, gentle dog with my children.

When we'd go hiking my partner, John and our son would frequently get ahead of our then young daughter and me. Coco would come running back to check on us. She looked out for us. And even when we weren't always our best selves, she readily forgave us and showered us with love. I wish I could be more like her. Wouldn't she have made a great member here at UUCV?

Our second dog, Tate joined us when he was 3 years old. For the first year, he laid under the kitchen table, his eyes popping open anytime anyone got up and moved. He was hypervigilant, anxious from being neglected. He had problems with attachment and didn't follow simple commands like "sit".

One day I put 4 blocks of butter on the kitchen counter to make cookies for the family. Later, the butter was gone. I asked John what he did with the butter. What butter? Hmmm, Tate, a clever butter thief, left no trace behind; not even paper to alert us to his shenanigans!

Huskies are notoriously independent. After much patience and love, hiking and camping trips with our family, his new pack, he became attached. Later, John took him on a 3 week camping and hiking trip where they were together 24/7. Now Tate always wants to know where John is. After receiving much needed love and attention and time to heal, he grew into his best sweet self. Initially, we weren't certain if he would be as loving as Coco. Love eventually provided healing.

Harvey, a husky mix is the latest newcomer. Sometimes when I attempted to pet him, he would grrr. I wanted to give him affection, but his anxiety prevented him from accepting it. When he needed to be re-directed, he would "grr-r" at me.

Then he would have his moments where he'd be playfully goofy and wanted to hug us. The hugging would have been better if he didn't weigh 60 pounds. Early on, he nipped John. Was this going to work?

Harvey previously failed an adoption. He hadn't been taught boundaries. I was afraid he may hurt one of my friends. John wanted Harvey to be given the love that he deserved. He could see Harvey's potential along with his foibles.

He became “the Harvey Project” because frankly he wore me out. He responded better to male redirection. I wasn’t used to a dog who didn’t listen. He was too anxious to go to obedience school with other dogs. Harvey is healing and can be re-directed. He has moments when his behavior is endearing; he brings joy to our lives.

Sometimes I wonder about people who snap at others. I find myself wondering, how is it that I can be more patient with a dog who is anxious than a person? Harvey needs more warning of what to expect because of hidden emotional wounds. I will never know about the invisible burden he carries. I find myself wondering, how often do I forget to consider that with people?

I, too, carry personal trauma which sometimes can make me prickly. I forget to consider my anxiety and other people’s anxiety when having difficulty in a relationship. My dogs remind me that holding onto grudges and anxieties get in the way of making new relationships and healing old friendships and relationships. I wish I could do it as easily as Coco did.

The Interconnected Web: What Animals Teach us about Human Nature by Jennifer Springsteen

Several years ago, on a camping trip in the Gifford Pinchot Forest, I wandered off alone with my evening tea, down an old logging road until I couldn't hear the spit and hiss of the fire. I climbed up on a fallen tree, adjusted myself, and found a knot where I could set my teacup. I breathed in the forest smell of all that fern and moss and humus—dry and smudgy.

From the corner of my eye, I caught movement, tree branches, I thought, but as they continued to move into my line of vision, I realized what I was seeing: the antlers of a great buck. I held my breath. He was so close; he nearly brushed my shoulder. I could have reached out and touched him. When he finally became aware of me, he gave a start and jumped sideways. We looked at one another. I tried to match his sideways stare with one of my own; he was skeptical but not afraid—clearly, I was the vulnerable one in the situation.

I don't know how long we stayed quiet together, both of us breathing the evening air. Something passed between us. It felt like a shiver. And then he slowly walked on his way, nibbling the tender bits of saplings as he went. Only once did he look back.

It was a moment I’ll never forget and one that won’t be duplicated, although there have been other instances in woods and water where I felt deeply connected in that web of existence. Where I felt I, too, am another animal moving through this world, curious and scared, alone, in community, vulnerable or joyous.

I hope to take time today to bring our hearts and minds into spiritual awareness with the other than humans (some say more-than humans) we share our lives with, our world with. I hope to deepen our stirrings of compassion with these animal relatives. I’ve heard you have deer visitors on occasion—maybe they’ll join us today.

Walt Whitman writes:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid

and self-contain'd

I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,

Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of

owning things,

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands

of years ago.

My mind drifts to a Walt Disney house cat in a double-breasted suit wringing its paws over a suitcase full of gold coins. Or a beaver shivering under bed-blankets, ruminating about the trees they felled that day. We laugh at ourselves when we see cartoon animals acting out our ridiculous follies—the values we hold dear or what we view as obstacles in the way of our happiness.

What is it animals see in us?

Mary Oliver's fox says, "I see you in all your seasons," and "I would not give my life for a thousand of yours." *Why not?* We are left to wonder.

One of my favorite short stories is by Karen Russell called "Saint Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves." The story highlights the girls' stages as they change their animal nature into human nature. We learn about these stages from *The Jesuit Handbook on Lycanthropic Culture Shock*. Lycanthropic—in case you didn't know (and I didn't either)—is the delusion, the madness, of seeing oneself as a wolf.

With the nuns watching judgmentally, the book opens, "At first, our pack was all hair and snarl and floor-thumping joy. We forgot the barked cautions of our mothers and fathers, all the promises we'd made to be civilized and ladylike, couth and kempt. We tore through the austere rooms, overturning dressing drawers, pawing through the neat piles of the Stage 3 girls' starched underwear, smashing lightbulbs with our bare fists."

Fantastic! If we had the time, I'd love to read the whole thing to you because of what it says about being human and being animal.

You know how teenage girls can be. And you can imagine the rigidity, the persistent evaluation, and punishment for not living up to what society deems right. Gloves and shoes and combed hair and suppressing the urge to howl. You might also imagine, rightly so (sorry for the spoiler), that some girls prefer their wolf natures to what their well-meaning parents and the nuns wish they would become. We are left questioning whether being human is the highest achievement one can reach.

I think of the early days of Covid: the fear split to anger, the empty shelves at the grocery stores, hoarding diapers. I think of the January 6 insurrection at the Capital. Is this what it means to be human? Is this what it means?

Often when we think of animal connections, we think about taming. There is something inside we humans that longs to name and tame, to gain the trust and love of something wild. I know I used to dream of taming a black stallion after watching that movie. A whale or a wolf or a crow. In my imaginings, taming is a form of friendship. Of love. Is that what it is? Might not there be some ego in the dog sitting on command, the horse who clears the hurdle? The house bunny who poops in the litter box? Satisfyingly *human* accomplishments.

I believe the origins of our desire to tame come from scripture. Genesis 1:25 reads, "God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind" and Genesis 1:26 goes on to say about mankind, "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." My challenge to this scripture, written by the hands of humans, is the interpretive lens: humans were already dominating, (or to use the Hebrew word, *subduing*) all things nonhuman—might our early scribes have misinterpreted their ability to dominate with God's proposal that they dominate? I disagree that a God of love wishes humans to dominate and subdue animals and to use them purely for human benefit. The word "stewardship" has been used more recently to occupy the place of "dominion," and I appreciate that guidance. Psalms praises God as creator and provider in beautiful poetry, yet these verses don't clarify humanity's role as cousin or king to earth's creatures. I bend toward the Buddhist teachings that all life is sacred and precious, humans no greater than animals.

During the pandemic, Instagram, Facebook and TicToc exploded with images of cute animals. They were our companions and our entertainment. I wonder if something shifted in us and our need for animals these past three years.

We have certainly needed lab animals—without all that testing, we wouldn't have our current vaccines. Where is our collective human thanks for that sacrifice? That there hasn't been any public acknowledgement of gratitude for those animal lives is a human shame. Our cheeks should be feverishly hot with it.

Some stories about animal and human relationships strip away the boundaries of dominance. There is a story of the diver who freed a whale from a tangled fishing net and how the whale put her eye right up to the diver, perhaps offering thanks, perhaps remembering him to herself.

I like to tell the story about John McCurley and his dog Bear, whom I met in Akiak, Alaska. John would go out on the ridge to hunt, and if he got separated from Bear, he'd leave his jacket on the ground, and Bear would find that jacket by its smell and lay down on it to wait for John's return. Half-blind, his bad hip be damned, old Bear would go running down to the lagoon when John's skiff came in. Those two loved each other. That's how it is with love, isn't it? We just can't wait to see one another; we are so happy to be in each other's presence, our troubles don't feel as permanent.

Do animals need us? Sure, if we've made them dependent. Do they love us? Maybe. If we've given them a reason to, and the reason is something other than food and shelter. Do they fear us? They should. Look at what we are capable of.

We do not always do right by animals, not in the past, and even still. In our desire for forward momentum, for money, green lawns, warmth and comfort, longer lashes, access to forests, access to forest products, faster and quieter and no-gas cars—we tend to move through the world as if human needs and desires are the most important. Let's not kid ourselves: the decisions we make every day are made with our human selves first. The reason environmental issues are being so widely discussed today—after all this time—is because humans have started to feel the impact of our "me first" decision-making. Our beloved animals have felt it for so long.

What does our theology instruct us about our connection to animals? Unitarian Universalists are concerned with the interdependent web of all existence. We are definitely entangled in the web of existence with animals. I am so pleased with the new language in our Article Two as the previous word "respect" in our 7th principle was so passive. It didn't require that we do anything. Could we respect something and still gain from it financially? Scientifically? Could we nourish ourselves responsibly?

We honor the interdependent web of all existence. We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

Let's consider that theology and let it help us with the complicated relationships we have—how does our theology guide which creatures to befriend, which to eat, which are pests, which are pleasure? We cry for the loss of the Dodo and the shrinking population of whales. Who weeps for the opossum on the side of the road caught under our tires as we race through life, from one important thing to the next important thing?

Sometimes, our best gift, our biggest show of love, is to leave animals alone to exist in spaces without humans. I recall an interview with a forest ranger discussing boats and motorized

vehicles in and near the forests. With a hitch in his voice, he said every creature deserved to sleep in peace. What if that could be true? If every one of us had the chance to drink from the water hole and to sleep in peace?

I didn't set out to offer any answers or try to sway you to think or do one thing or the other. I just wanted us to honor our relationships with animals together, here in community. I wanted us to hold other than humans in our thoughts and in our hearts.

Let's do that now:

Close your eyes or let your vision soften and picture an animal you love: how they look and feel. What makes them happy? How do they sound when they are tired or frustrated? What is something they just despise? How do you spend time with your animal beloved? What could you do so you could spend more time with them?

Now think not of your own beloved companion, but of an animal species you would miss terribly if it were gone. What is it about that species that so appeals to you? Hold in your heart what they look like and sound like. A story you know about them. Consider one thing you might do to make the earth a better place for that animal.

You can open your eyes.