

"They Will Teach You"
Reverend Alison Hyder

September 22, 2002

The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

MEDITATION: by Joy Harjo [life prayers, p 52]

To pray, you open your whole self
to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
to one whole voice that is you
And know there is more
that you can't see, can't hear
can't know except in moments
steadily growing, and in languages
that aren't always sound but other
circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
over Salt River, Cirled in blue sky
in wind, swept our hearts clean
with sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves, and know
that we must take the utmost care
and kindness, in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
all this, and breathe, knowing
we are truly blessed, because we

were born, and die soon, within a
true circle of motion,
like eagle rounding out the morning
inside us.

We pray that it will be done
in beauty.
In beauty.

READING: Mary Oliver -

The Turtle

breaks from the blue-black
skin of the water, dragging her shell
with its mossy scutes
across the shallows and through the rushes
and over the mudflats, to the uprise,
to the yellow sand,
to dig with her ungainly feet
a nest, and hunker there spewing
her white eggs down
into the darkness, and you think

of her patience, her fortitude,
her determination to complete
what she was born to do----
and then you realize a greater thing----
she doesn't consider
what she was born to do.
She's only filled
with an old blind wish.
It isn't even hers but came to her
in the rain or the soft wind
which is a gate through which her life keeps walking.

She can't see
herself apart from the rest of the world
or the world from what she must do
every spring.
Crawling up the high hill,
luminous under the sand that has packed against her skin,
she doesn't dream
she knows
she is a part of the pond she lives in,
the tall trees are her children,
the birds that swim above her
are tied to her by an unbreakable string.

SERMON: "They Will Teach You" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Today the Carrie Seaman Animal Shelter is holding its major fundraiser, a walk to raise money for a humane shelter for abandoned and mistreated animals in the lower cape. The walk will start at 1:45 at St. Mary's of the Harbor Episcopal Church; registration begins at 1 pm and will open with a Blessing of the Animals. So our own brief Animal Blessing ceremony will be held on the lawn at 12:30 to allow everyone time to get up to the East End and sign up.

But as I was thinking about the ceremony, it occurred to me that it is not our animals who need the blessing. The pets of Provincetown are probably some of the best-loved and treated animals in the state, nurtured and considered and adored. The other day I was telling my brother that I intend to screen my houseguests for their sensitivity to cats. After all, my cat Lexy is 16 years old. She has a right to be comfortable in her own home. My brother remarked that no one else is as concerned with a pet as I am (maybe he said "obsessed"). But I just laughed. He's never walked around town.

Provincetown is dog central. Dogs are everywhere, on the beach, carrying their toys down the street, splayed out in little baby packs, lolling their heads out of cars, in stores and banks and pet boutiques. And we are just as zealous about our cats and birds and ferrets and iguanas. They are our families, important to our happiness and security. They give us love and stimulation and mystery and beauty.

So this Blessing of the Animals is in truth an acknowledgement of the blessing that animals are to us, everyday. And not just our own companion animals, of course, but sparrows and eels and skunks and turtles and dragonflies, the whole population of creatures that accompany us through life, that make the world less lonely and forbidding and sterile.

As children we recognized our kinship with animals as something compelling and real. When I was a kid, I created scrapbooks filled with every article or photograph of animals I could find, from Life magazine spreads about cheetahs on the veldt to my dad's cigar wrappers, which had a bird theme for a while. I learned how to categorize ungulates and marsupials and had a coloring book with the different species of dogs and birds. I daydreamed I was a veterinarian tending and protecting animals in the wild.

Most children relate to animals. Like animals, they can't fully express themselves. And like animals, kids don't have much power in the world - they can't work or vote or drive. So children realize that animals, for all their wildness, are under the control of human adults just like they are. And children have the same desire they see in animals to be exuberant and happy, free from rules and limitations. Animals are a way for children to connect to their own bodies and how they work and what they can do.

Of course, this is the real danger. We all know what bodies can do. The evolution of human civilization is based on our separation and alienation from the earth and from other species. We walled out nature and did our best to order and control our surroundings to demonstrate our superiority over beasts with their base physical drives and instincts. Christian theology in particular elevated spirit over matter and viewed the body as sinful and disgusting, something to be subdued and chastened and feared, the one thing that could separate us from God. Nature became synonymous with sexuality and chaos, something God gave humans to keep control. Our task as souls was to prepare for the afterlife, when we would be pure spirit with no messy bodies with their urges and fluids and frailties. Only humans were worthy of God's salvation. The Enlightenment simply intellectualized that whole philosophy of human superiority, elevating the human brain and demoting animals to the level of scientific study, without feelings or rights or worth.

But instead of elevating humanity we have only made ourselves feel more empty and restricted and depressed. Fear has destroyed our soul. The more we have separated ourselves from nature - paving cities and shutting ourselves in with air conditioning and buying all our meats and groceries chopped and packaged and pristine - the more alienated and lost we have become. For we have always needed the earth, needed that sense of belonging. This is our home. Everything about it echoes in our souls. The shapes of trees and riverbeds are identical to the patterns of our veins.

Our DNA is something like 99% identical to that of pigs. We continually recycle molecules that were once olive trees in the Middle East, the bill of a puffin, part of an asteroid. We can see our own human cultures reflected in chimpanzees and wolf packs. We were all formed together, and our happiness is linked.

"But ask the animals," says the book of Job, "and they will teach you,
the birds of the air and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?
In his hand is the soul of every living thing
And the breath of every human being." [Job 12:7-10]

As Unitarian Universalists we covenant to honor the intrinsic worth of every person - and also to respect the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. These might seem like contradictory statements, but in fact, they are inseparable. For it's impossible to respect oneself without recognizing the forces of life and beauty and intelligence that created and sustain us, the same spark that exists in every living thing, from cornflower to collie.

In 1928 Henry Beston wrote *The Outermost House*, a book about one year on Cape Cod. Living in his beach house in Eastham, he realized, "We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings, they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of earth."

Animals are not our subjects, but our companions and our guides on how to exist on earth. They have so much to teach us about how to be alive and embodied. We can see all of our human behaviors mirrored in them. Young animals race and grapple and explore. We watch our dogs become lost in the excitement of some new smell, and then race back to us with complete delight and trust. Cats, on the other hand, seem to melt mysteriously into the wild, focused and intense. We can trace our family dynamics to the behavior of bonobo apes, our patterns of aggression and warfare to chimpanzees. And we know that young animals taken from their mothers and reared in isolation become depressed and withdrawn and fail to thrive.

But mostly what we learn from animals is that we *are* animals, and we suffer like a panther in a cage if we separate ourselves too much from the natural world. We too become depressed and fail to thrive if we are taken from our mother earth. We cannot afford to dishonor and degrade the earth. If we erect barriers between our identities and those of other species we experience a kind of spiritual alienation that can lead to depression and despair.

Studies have shown that hospital patients whose rooms have views of nature have a better rate of recovery than patients in windowless rooms - even a picture of nature helps. Simply seeing an animal can be healing. And petting an animal can reduce blood pressure. More and more nursing homes and rehab hospitals have animals "on staff" to cuddle and comfort the residents. "Patients are brought out of themselves by the feel of a cat purring or the enthusiasm of a dog that offers unconditional love," writes John p. Wiley, Jr. in the *Smithsonian Magazine*. "The dog does not know that part of your heart has died and the rest of your life is filled with similar imperfections. It knows only that you and it are here, nose to nose... living in the present moment. The dog is happy to be with you, no questions asked." ["Help is on the Way"]

Elizabeth Tarbox, who preached here a number of years ago, wrote this for her church newsletter:

Natalie was a gold-and-white guinea pig, with full lips and an overstated stomach. She shared her life with us, accepted our love and care, nibbled daintily on spinach and dandelions, and swooned over the very smell of strawberries. Natalie cherished her mate, Frank, and let us stroke her babies, and forgave us when we gave the babies away.

When Natalie got sick we took her to the veterinarian and were told she would not get well again, so we made that choice which we human animals have granted ourselves and asked the doctor to put her to sleep. But Natalie didn't sleep. She lay in my lap and quivered and sighed and the life that she had so generously shared with us left her little round body and she was dead.

And I thought, how curious it is that this small animal should move me so, that this little life whose whole span had been but five years should make me wrestle with my conscience about the right of humans to have charge over animals; how strange that this lifeless furry creature with the now still body should bring me to tears.

I had personified a guinea pig. I had granted her a place and dignity in my home. Somehow by my love I had elevated her to something more than a species of rodent. But she in turn had dignified me by accepting my care. She had brought beauty into our home, and had stirred in me emotions I am glad to have: love and the desire to nurture. She had trusted me and thereby had made me trustworthy.

Animals honor us with their companionship, with their trust and affection. It still astonishes me that my cat - so very different a being, so mysterious and beautiful, should be in relationship with me, and let me love her. It is a great mystery. And because of her, because she accepts me and trusts me, I feel more connected to wild creatures, and to the earth.

Like the turtle, we belong to this world, need it, love, it, we are tied to the birds and the trees by an unbreakable string. There is a joy in being alive, in the smell of fresh strawberries, the gentle sound of breathing, feeling a furry face against our skin, the warmth of hands clasped together. All this beauty, our gift for being alive.

"I don't know exactly what a prayer is." writes Mary Oliver, though you know that she does, that her whole being is a psalm of praise to the earth. She says,

*I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

Ask the animals, and they will teach you.

CLOSING WORDS

Remember the sky you were born under
Remember the moon, know who she is.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn. Remember the sundown and the giving away to night.
Remember your birth - you are evidence of struggle.
Remember the earth whose skin you are
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their tribes, their families..
Remember the wind, remember her voice
Remember that all is in motion, is growing, is you
Remember the dance that life is.

Remember.