

4/3/11 Sermon

"Pet Tales"

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Can you imagine a world without pets? I don't want to.

Humans have cultivated relationships with animals since the dawning of history. At first we treated animals only as a resource, a thing, an object or tool to be used or eaten. Over time, however, a yearning for companionship on long hunts and during the dark fearful nights of mystery developed. People began to domesticate animals as pets, companions and protectors.

Through such links we learned greater compassion and love for each other and all other creatures in the interconnected web of life.

Originally, we were told animals were made to be our companions – our partners and not our possessions. In keeping with our UU principles, we believe that they are ours to enjoy but not exploit or abuse. Animals enrich our lives, amuse and make us laugh in one moment and in the next be our soul mates that touch our hearts in a soothing and healing way.

Let me share a remarkable true healing story with you. It is about a therapy dog's visit in pediatric wards of hospitals where children lie sick or gravely injured. One of those youngsters was a 14-year-old girl who had an aneurysm ruptured inside her brain. She'd arrived at the hospital and five days later was still in a coma, unconscious and unresponsive to the world around. Nothing the doctors tried seemed to be able to bring her back to life.

Her mother, constantly at her side, left the room to get a bite to eat. Right after she left, a therapy dog and his trainer enter the room. By the time mom came back, her daughter had gotten out of bed and was sitting up in a chair, smiling and looking around the room.

Can you imagine, the dog had actually climbed up on the bed with the girl and sprawled across her chest? Maybe the pooch even applied a little miracle dog slobber to her face. But as soon as the girl felt the weight of the dog and the soft fur against her skin, her arms that had lain limp and unmoving for over five days, rose up and circled round that big friendly mutt. It was an act of pure puppy love that did what modern medicine couldn't do.

That was in my mind as close to anything I am comfortable calling a miracle.

So, today we give thanks for all the wondrous gifts our pets – dogs, cat, and iguanas; fish, monkeys, chickens, snakes and on in an endless list – teach us about life, love and compassion. We are grateful for their contribution to our well being and the role they play in helping us to remember we are only a small entity in a very large interconnected universe.

Rev. Gary Kowalski tells this wonderful story how animals keep us humble and not to puffed up:

It is reported that the following edition of the Book of Genesis was discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. If authentic, it would shed light on the question, "Where do pets come from?"

And Adam said, "Lord, when I was in the garden, you walked with me every day. Now I do not see you anymore. I am lonesome here and it is difficult for me to remember how much you love me."

And God said, "No problem! I will create a companion for you that will be with you forever and who will be a reflection of my love for you, so that you will know I love you even when you cannot see me. Regardless of how selfish and childish and unlovable you may be, this new companion will accept you as you are and will love you as I do, in spite of yourself."

And God created a new animal to be a companion for Adam; and it was a good animal. And God was pleased. And the new animal was pleased to be with Adam and he wagged his tail.

And Adam said, "But Lord, I have already named all the animals in the Kingdom and all the good names are taken and I cannot think of a name for this new animal."

And God said, "No problem! Because I have created this new animal to be a reflection of my love for you, his name will be a mirror reflection of my own name, and you will call him DOG."

And Dog lived with Adam and was a companion to him and loved him. And Adam was comforted. And God was pleased. And Dog was content and wagged his tail.

After a while, it came to pass that Adam's guardian angel came to the Lord and said, "Lord, Adam has become filled with pride. He struts and preens like a peacock and he believes he is worthy of adoration. Dog has indeed taught him that he is loved, but no one has taught him humility. "

And the Lord said, "No problem! I will create for him a companion who will be with him forever and who will see him as he is. The companion will remind him of his limitations, so he will know that he is not worthy of adoration."

And God created CAT to be a companion to Adam. And Cat would not obey Adam. And when Adam gazed into Cat's eyes, he was reminded that he was not the Supreme Being. And Adam learned humility. And God was pleased. And Adam was greatly improved. And Cat didn't give a damn one way or the other.

Those of us who have dogs and cats know that to be true. We bond to pets to such a degree that they at times bring us to tears of both sadness and laughter. The fact that animals amuse us so much must be a good thing ... for Garrison Keillor tells us so. He notes that "cats are intended to teach us that not everything in nature has a function." And Robert Benchley says that "a boy can learn a lot from a dog: obedience, loyalty, and to turn around three times before lying down."

Let me share a dog tale with you. In seminary I adopted a six-week-old German Pointer we named Berkley. He was a jumper, not over hurdles but vertically up in the air, springing up four feet over and over again. You know dogs; they will play till they drop.

Berkeley was a favorite on a very pet friendly campus. The dogs would run and wrestle, tug ropes and generally create havoc on the quad. Berkeley was always in the midst of the fray. His puppy energy drew smiles from everyone. But one day things changed.

Over a two-week time, he grew more and more weak and listless. He stopped eating and began to lose weight. On the quad, he would no longer run or tug at the ropes but just walk with it in his mouth. Amazingly, the other animals seemed to instinctively know something was wrong. They would walk very slowly on either side of Berkeley holding ... not tugging the rope. It was as if they knew that he was ill and were taking care of him – showing compassion.

Seeing that kind of behavior, could any of us deny those animals have an emotional life and are part of the web of existence?

Things took a turn May 13, 1999; my birthday. I returned home from work around 7 p.m. and found Berkley lying on the couch where I had left him that morning. He was now unable to move. All he could do was look up at me in that sad way dogs some time do. It broke my heart because I

couldn't help him. All he could manage was a dispirited wag of his tail.

I tried to give him some water out of my cupped hand but he couldn't drink; so I just sat with him and stroked his cool body. He looked at me with those sweet brown eyes, closed them one last time, sighed and died ...

It was as if he had waited for me to come so he would not die alone. I sat there alone with him and sobbed. In the same way you love your pets, I loved that crazy dog.

Anyone who thinks life begins when the kids move out and the dog dies don't have pets. To remember Berkeley, I organized a memorial service on campus. I know that might sound a bit overboard, but many of my friends, all the campus dogs and some cats too came. We had doggie communion with Berkeley's left over Milk Bones. They ate like dogs, while we humans told pet tales. It was pretty cool. It felt right to remember a pet that had brought so much joy in such a short time.

I still miss Berkeley. He helped teach me about unconditional love and compassion. If you have ever lost a pet you know how we grow to love them and they enrich our lives.

John Robbins asks us to remember to "open our heart to the many mysterious and wonderful companions who fly, walk, crawl, and otherwise populate the beautiful earth." Pet owners do and we learn to respect for all creatures who breathe the same air as we do. They help us to live in harmony with the natural world.

In the end, the tears I shed that day burned but I came to appreciate my tears for on the other side of sadness is laughter and joy and with that comes hope.

In the words of Ann Mortifree, "We can again look at the world and ourselves with respect and reverence, with eyes that can enable us to participate in the sacred potential of Creation and take our place in the council of all beings."

In the end, like Adam in the Bible, we acknowledge our needs for connection. And offer a bemused smile at how animals have a life of their own, often put us in our place and are the cause of great happiness.