

MESSAGES FROM THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

Sermon by Ilene Cummings. April 27, 2008 (a)

Good morning fellow animals. Does that surprise you, to be addressed as animals? Me too.

Sometimes it's easy to forget this hidden truth. Especially in these days of computers, cars, airplanes, replaceable knees, plastic everything, cellphones, artificial intelligence, you name it. But strip away all our human-made paraphernalia and what do we find? We each live in a body of flesh, with bones, skin, hair, inner organs, blood. We each need air, food, a place to live. If you think about it carefully, we all have much more in common with the other animals of the earth than we generally recognize. All animals have a stake in the fate of the earth.

Somewhere along the line of history we humans began to think of ourselves as far superior to other animals with the intrinsic right to make use of them in whatever way we wished. But this was not always so, in ancient times and in the so-called primitive cultures a few of which still exist today, people lauded the animals as great teachers, purveyors of wisdom, possessors of souls and spiritual qualities.

As an example, in many First Nations traditions people had or have individual "totem animals". These animals first appear to the seeker in dreams and visions and then are adopted as special spiritually connected animals to help the human in his or her daily life. The animals lend their special qualities when needed, continue to appear in dreams, to advise and assist. They even sometimes appear on the physical plane at crucial moments. Some clans have specific totem animals that oversee a complete group. I like that these totem animals still exist even if in diminished form here in our modern world. It reminds us of a time when humans and animals were more closely connected. Some of us modern rational thinkers tend to look on all this as ignorance. But I wonder. I challenge you to wonder too. Is it possible that they might know something we don't? Perhaps you have a totem animal or two just waiting in the wings for you to notice.

Some of us live with our own personal emissaries from the animal kingdom. That is, we have pets. Like all pet owners my husband John and I spend a lot of time observing the actions of our two cats and commenting on them, giving them our affection, worrying about their health. They are definitely a

part of our daily lives and are greatly missed when they die or disappear. Pet animals lend their companionship and connect us with the larger animal kingdom. If you own or have ever owned a pet, recall a time you felt connected with them. (*pause*) I remember holding our little black rabbit Ruby on the night she died.

Whether you own a pet or not, you may remember a time when you looked into the eyes of an animal and felt a deep connection. With domestic animals this is not unusual, but occasionally some of us have had the experience of unexpectedly looking into the eyes of a wild animal and this is a completely different experience. Has this ever happened to you? We tend to remember these moments as they seem almost electric in their intensity. A moment of connection between you as a conscious being and this other untamed animal.

Here are four lessons we can learn from animals in our modern world. These are just four I've thought of, I'm sure you can think of many more.

Many of us are familiar with the teachings of the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hahn and have studied how to practice mindfulness and live "in the moment". Rather than reading all those books—I have a simpler suggestion on how to live mindfully. Watch an animal—even a dog or a cat will do) and emulate their state of mind. A cat lolling in the sun, a dog joyfully sniffing the air—they are each in the moment, without anticipation, without regret. Granted a dog may anticipate going for a walk but he or she is happy in the moment, knowing the walk is about to take place. Similarly, our cats do not like to see us pack a suitcase. But even then, their discomfort is in the moment. They are not thinking about what will happen tomorrow and or what happened yesterday. In this moment they are easy or uneasy with our actions and will let us know this.

And by the way—other animals don't multi-task! It almost makes us laugh to even imagine an animal trying to multi-task. Think of that—they do one thing at a time.

Lesson number two: listen to your body. Animals do this instinctively. When they are ill, they do not push themselves to try to keep going. Animals are wonderful teachers about how to stretch the body too. Watch a cat or dog luxuriously yawning and stretching their legs after a nap. The ancient yoga masters studied their moves to create the beginnings of what became

physical yoga practice. But animals don't do it because someone told them it is good for them. They do it because it feels good in the moment. They need ask nothing but their own bodies what is needed here.

So those are today's lessons number one and two that we can learn from the animals, "Live in the moment" and "Listen to your body".

Lesson number three. "Take only What You Need." Despite horror stories to the contrary, predator animals for the most part, kill only when they are hungry and only what they need. Animals in the wild are never overweight, unless it is part of their yearly cycle—to fatten up for a lean time coming. However, tame or zoo animals who do not need to hunt in order to eat, have the same tendencies as overweight humans. They will eat more, perhaps out of boredom, than is optimum if it is available. If they had to hunt and catch everything they ate, they would be sleek and trim. So would we, for that matter!

Perhaps this would be an appropriate moment for me to put in a quick word for vegetarianism. Some humans feel it is very wrong to take the life of an animal to feed ourselves. And it is true it would be kinder to the animals and take less land to feed the world's humans if we were all vegetarian. So it is one way to honor the animal kingdom. Do it if it feels natural and right. However, I do not think eating meat is intrinsically wrong. Remember, the people of the First Nations, despite their close connection to nature and to their totem animals were not vegetarian. But they differed from us in that they honored the spirit of the animal that they killed to eat. Perhaps it is not necessary to cut out all meat forever or feel horribly guilty every time we eat meat. But we should at least spare a moment to acknowledge the life of the animal died for us to eat this. Just a quick grace or prayer helps to keep the interconnected web alive.

As well as taking only the optimum amount of food, remember again the words of Whitman on animals: "not one is demented with the mania of owning things". They live simply and with pleasure, in the moment and taking only what they need.

Lesson number four. Animals teach us to be true to our natures. But first of all, animals do not see themselves as separate from the natural world as humans tend to do. As I mentioned in my November sermon, it is humankind's sense of separation from nature that is the true "original sin"

and in fact, what has led humans to so much suffering. It is that sense of separation that leads to greed and war and weapons of mass destruction and all the vile injustices of this world.

A zebra is not separate from nature and is true to its zebra-ness, a tiger, to its tiger-ish ways. What is the human's true nature? Now we might say that it is the human's nature to be greedy, selfish, prideful, which may appear to have some truth in it, but once again these human flaws are connected to our sense of being separate from the other animals and the natural world. Our larger consciousness also leads us to be kind and grateful, creative and giving. Are these not also our nature? Our highest nature. Let us be true to our highest nature by recognizing our interdependence with the larger whole and acting from this awareness.

So there are our four lessons: Live in the moment; Listen to your body; Take only what we need and Be true to your higher nature.

Now for those of you here for the first time, please note this is not standard procedure in a Unitarian sermon. However, those of you familiar with my previous sermons may not be too surprised. I overheard some animals the other night in my dreams and they also have some messages to deliver.

[Ilene shares an excerpt from her one woman show “We’re All in the Same Stew”.]

My dear animals, excuse my anthropomorphizing—it’s done with a loving heart, believe me.

The frog gives us the most important message of all: “we’re all in the same stew”. We’re all in this together, the big, the small, the mighty, the shy. What affects one affects us all.

A friend who listened to an earlier version of this sermon said, but what can we do? Tell us something we can do, Ilene. So okay, here we go, I already mentioned vegetarianism and giving thanks to the animal when eating meat and eating less meat or only what you need so I won’t say anything further there. We can send money or become involved with organizations that have been developed to aid animals. A good example is the World Wildlife Federation. Closer to home is the Humane Society. There are many ways

you can help as a volunteer. But a more spiritual approach would be to connect with animals whenever the opportunity presents itself. Look into your pet's eyes, greet the animals that cross your path, look at them and really think about their place in the world, learn the lessons they can teach. Get out in nature. Choose an animal to be your special connection. I challenge you to find your totem animal.

Right now the earth and human thought is going through a major transformation. This changing tide of thought about the environment and new ways of connecting with the environment is extremely important. Last week many members of our congregation discussed a change in direction to make our own congregation more environmentally responsible. Worldwide we are seeing the beginning of this great change as we humans struggle to once again live in harmony with the divine music of life. It's a struggle the animals unwittingly share but do not worry about on a larger scale. It's an exciting but disturbing time to be a human being on this planet. After all, it's human nature to worry about the future.

Human nature. Hm. Let us return to those lessons from the animals we learned at the beginning of this sermon: Be in the moment, listen to your body, take only what you need, be true to your nature.

Aside from greed, curiosity and fears for the future, it is also our nature to be grateful, to reach out in community, to be supportive and to love.

Let's return to living in the moment. Let's start right now. I invite you to express your gratitude to the animals that are close to your heart or who cause you particular concern in the world. I invite you to do this by speaking aloud, saying "I love....." and giving the name of these animals. When someone says a name, let's repeat it together. (*Do this for a minute or two.*)

Let us pause here. This could go on for a very long time! Let us feel great gratitude that we can be here in community and know that somewhere in the world all these animals exist, including the lion. Asleep and awake, they share our earth, waiting for the invitation to be our great teachers.

So may it be.