

“The Peace of Wild Things”

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It's an old joke.

A guy buys a new Lamborghini and wants to have it blessed.

He first goes to his rabbi to ask him to bless the Lamborghini, but the rabbi says he doesn't know what a Lamborghini is and declines the invitation to bless it.

Next he goes to a priest, and the same thing happens.
“I'm sorry, I'd like to help you out but I have no idea what a Lamborghini is. Without knowing, I couldn't possibly bless one.
He walked away in horror, when the priest asked if a Lamborghini was a breed of dog or a type of cheese..

With that, as many an exasperated person has done, the man turns to the Unitarian minister in town.

His heart sinks, when after explaining his request, he sees the same confused look on the minister's face that he's already seen on the face of the priest and rabbi.

But then the Unitarian minister says,
“I love your Lamborghini, but I have to tell you, I have no idea what a blessing is...”

As I said, it's an old joke. It's been around for a while.
And I don't think it's stood the test of time.
I say that because I, for one, do know what a blessing is, and I'm pretty sure you do, as well.

Of course, the classic definition of the word blessing involves some super holy person calling down divine favour on someone or something.

But that's just one way to think about it.

We've all likely known, at least at some point in our lives, what it feels like for someone important in our lives to give or withhold their blessing—that is, to give their approval, or to decline or refuse to give their approval of something important to us.

With most blessings there is a power imbalance. One party is in a stronger position than the other.

Pet owners know something about this.

Those of you with dogs know what it's like to have to understand yourself—and more importantly have your dog understand you—as the Alpha, as the top dog in the relationship.

For those of you with cats, you likely quickly came to realize that this is a fool's errand and that you'll never truly call the shots in your house. All cats are alpha dogs.

All kidding aside, we humans have the upper hand most of the time, when it comes to the animals in our lives.

We keep them fed and walked and in good health. We pay the bills and clean up after them. We're the ones in charge, though given all that we do on their behalf, we may question whether we're really the boss.

In the way that it's sometimes hard to tell who is controlling who, I think it can also be hard at times to tell who is blessing who.

I've been reminded of this many times in recent months as I've clicked on the seemingly ubiquitous videos posted on Facebook that remind us of our complicated relationship with the animal world.

I'm not taking just about all the cute kitty videos online.

I'm taking about the videos that have shone light on the false boundary between our world and theirs.

The videos that crack open our hearts with compassion for our fellow creatures, and show the great lengths we humans will go to to help or protect or save them.

You've likely seen some of these videos, too.

Like the Great White Shark stranded on a New England beach last summer after the tide went out. People splashed it with water—at real risk to themselves—to keep it alive until it could be pulled out into the water after a couple of hours.

Or the Orca in BC, who was stranded on a rocky shore in the wake of an outgoing tide. There, people laboured for eight hours, covering her with wet blankets.

Until the incoming tide enveloped the whale in the life-giving waters of her natural element and she swam to safety.

We humans are deeply moved by the sight of a fish out of water.

And at our best, we respond when they're in distress.

Not too long ago, I read about a whale who was caught in a life-threatening web of fishing nets. She was having great difficulty even swimming.

A group of tourists noticed her and pulled their small boat alongside her massive body.

And then in an awkward dance with one of the largest creatures on earth, they leaned overboard as best they could, and with makeshift implements struggled to disentangle the great whale from the netting.

Eventually, their efforts paid off and she was freed.

As astounding as this feat was, what unfolded next is the even more miraculous part of the story.

Rather than diving into the depths and getting as far away as possible from humans, the source of her suffering in the first place, after all, the whale circled the boat for almost an hour, breaching multiple times and slapping her tail, to the delight of her rescuers.

There's reason to guess she was, in some way, expressing gratitude to these kind strangers for all of their trouble.

Now, there's a danger in too easily assigning human-like qualities to animals, and, yet, the whale and her watchers all seemed to part ways after that encounter blessed.

Blessed by the connection of being together.

A few weeks ago when I was in Kenya, I visited the Jane Goodall Chimpanzee Sanctuary, part of the Sweetwaters Wildlife Preserve near Mt Kenya.

Chimps aren't native to Kenya.

These animals were relocated to this area after the civil war broke out in Burundi more than two decades ago.

A powerful example of the many animals on this planet who've become refugees, forced to move to safety because of human conflict, human folly, and human greed.

That day at the sanctuary, I ended up having a private audience with these amazing creatures, accompanied only by my guide Sam, who knew the chimps by name and called them to the fence installed around their 250 acre enclosure.

At one point, I sat on the ground next to the fence, and was swiftly joined by three chimps, who sat less than a metre away.

We just sat and stared at each other.

I don't know what they saw in my eyes, but in theirs, I saw creatures not so very different from us.

That fifteen minutes sitting there is easily among the most powerful experiences of my life. Even now, I struggle to find any other word besides communion to describe those moments.

With a fuller command of English,
the chimps may have come up with a different word.

But the truth is that I felt deeply blessed by the encounter;
I felt blessed to spend such rich time in the presence
of these wild creatures who share more than 98% of our DNA.

I've seen chimps in zoos in the past, of course,
but nothing like this, where I was more a guest in their home.

Earlier I said there's a danger
in too readily assigning human emotions to animals.

And yet there is also a danger in ignoring our profound similarities,
in seeing just how very much we share.

One of the most disconcerting things I saw in Africa
was the sight of one of these chimpanzees, named Poco,
standing fully upright.
It was freakish.

I, of course, grew up watching "The Planet of the Apes,"
and I remember watching those bad TV shows from the late 60s and 70s,
featuring chimpanzees wearing human clothes and acting like people—
going to the office, driving cars, eating in restaurants.
Lancelot Link, I think one of them was named!

But to see this chimpanzee standing before me
on his hind legs and walking around, and only slightly shorter than me,
was disturbing, and awesome, and amazingly majestic.

As it turns out, his ability to stand this way isn't natural.

He was, from a young age, confined to a small cage that deformed his back,
forcing his spine to grow in this way.

His torture was part of an effort by a shopkeeper
to entice customers to come into his store and buy things.

We humans can be compassionate, but we can also be downright cruel.

As I watched Poco move about, I couldn't help but think of my visit,
a few days before, to The National Museum of Kenya in Nairobi.

There, I saw some of the oldest hominid skulls and skeletons ever found.

The image of these bones from The Great Rift Valley,
the cradle of human life, was before me as I thought about this chimpanzee's
back—as I gave thought to his particular story.

The memory of these bones were with me, as I thought
of the long evolutionary journey that led our common ancestor
to emerge from the waters, to the land, to the trees, and beyond.

In the grand scheme of things,
our branching off from chimpanzees 7 million years back
isn't really all that long ago.

It's written in the Psalms
that we were made only “a little lower than the angels.”

But what struck me in that moment
was a fresh and deeper awareness than I had ever felt
that we're evolved only a little bit different
from these magnificent creatures.

Our Seventh Principle reminds us that this is true—
a call to honour the “interconnected web of all existence,
of which we are a part.”
Not apart from, but a part of.

This phrase signals a significant theological shift
from much of traditional Western understanding.

Many of the world's great scriptures give humanity dominion over
all the animals of the earth.

That understanding has brought about terrible consequences as a result.

Yet, more recently, a deepening appreciation of humanity's role as stewards of life on this planet has emerged, and not a moment too soon.

While we hold much in common with the creatures of this earth, the place where there is a vast difference between humans and the other animals in the world is in our ability to take action to save and sustain the biodiversity that not only protects their lives, but that preserves our own.

We are interconnected. Our futures intertwined. Our destinies are dependent upon each other.

In the animal conservation park where the chimpanzees live, there are also three of the world's last four Northern White Rhinoceri.

They live in an enclosed area of 700 acres, and are protected 24 hours a day by armed guards.

They are now beyond the age of reproducing, so these animals will, quite literally, be the end point of an entire evolutionary journey, brought to a premature end by the loss of habitat due to civil war, and poaching that stems from an appalling desire for their horn.

Within a few short years these animals will walk the earth no more.

And in such a palpable way, their blessing to life on this planet will be forever lost.

Wendell Berry, in the words Melissa shared earlier for our meditation, speaks to the saving grace of the natural world.

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought

of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

All these creatures of the earth and sky are a source of grace.

To come into the peace of wild things,
to rest in the grace of the world, is to see ourselves
as part of the tremendous, astonishing dance of life
that has been swirling down the eons of time
to bring us and them into being.

May that dance swirl on, with care and compassion, in you and me.

May we summon the courage to protect the life we share on this planet
to ensure the well-being of all life, not least our own lives,
and those who will come after us.

Let us love this earth that has given birth to us all.

Let us bask in the blessings of this world,
and moved by these gifts of grace,
go forth to bless all of life on this good green earth.

Amen.