

SAVING EARTH, ONE LIVING CREATURE AT A TIME

A Message by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro
April 26, 2009

Lately we've been hearing a lot about "going green" as a strategy for saving our planet and saving our economy too. The new initiatives proposed by the Obama administration hold great promise for the future of energy conservation in this country, and eventually decreasing the dependence on fossil fuels that has gotten us into our present dilemmas of foreign entanglements and domestic pollution. Clearly, we have a long way to go, but finally a long-term strategy that will help get us there. Closer to home, we can take encouragement from efforts such as the Staunton Green 2020 project led by Erik Curren and others, who consider this "third wave" of environmentalism as an excellent opportunity for local business and jobs. [Chris Graham, "Two Shades of Green," *The New Dominion*, April 2009, p. 7-9]

I believe that our efforts will ultimately succeed only if we take **personal responsibility** for saving our Mother Earth. In doing so, we will be swimming upstream against a powerful current of exploitation and indifference that is deeply anchored in Western culture: the attitude that the natural world is meant to serve only human needs. One of the most significant ways that we can overcome our estrangement from nature is through our companionship with **animals**. Animals connect us with a reality that is wider, deeper, and richer than the limited range of our human experience. The very word "animal" originates in the Latin word *anima*, which means soul or spirit. To me, to be spiritual is to participate in a reality that both **includes us and transcends** us as individuals and as a species. Thus our experiences with animals can inspire us to a richer spiritual life. Today I will share some stories that exemplify our spiritual connection with our animal partners, but I also look forward to hearing **your stories** during our discussion.

One of the most dramatic and uplifting stories is the saga of a mutt named Lava, who was rescued as a puppy from the ravages of war in Iraq. The story of the mission to save Lava and eventually bring him to the United States is told by Marine Corps officer Jay Kopelman in his bestselling book *From Baghdad, With Love*. [Refer to photo on back of the order of service.] Lava was named after a Marine battalion from Hawaii called the Lava Dogs, who would tragically lose 31 of their soldiers in a helicopter crash. Against all odds, Kopelman perseveres in his efforts to get Lava out of Iraq. Time after time, his rescue attempts are thwarted by U.S. or Iraqi regulations that forbid such a thing. But each time the rescue seems to reach a dead end, someone--usually a stranger--is willing to do something extraordinary to help. Somehow the fate of Lava united them.

Eventually, Lava and his unlikely rescuer are reunited in the United States. Their reunion was covered by the media. A reporter asked Col. Kopelman, “What would you tell people who might suggest your time would have been better spent saving people instead of a dog?” . . . Luckily,“ he says, “before I have to answer the question, the van from the airport with Lava pulls up. I can see his face through the window and see how big he’s gotten in the last two months, but it’s the same face, the same goofy look in his eyes, the same crazy tongue hanging out sideways, and I hear cameras click behind me and wonder how I’m supposed to act at a time like this. . . . Film footage later shows a dog barreling toward a well-composed Marine in uniform who bends down, catches the dog in mid-leap, stands up and turns circles with his face buried in the dog’s fur. . . . Why wasn’t my time spent helping people instead of a puppy? I don’t know, and I don’t care, but at least **I saved something**. [pp. 171-73]

As the story of Lava’s rescue shows, animals can serve as a source of **healing**, especially in the most extraordinary conditions of violence and despair such as the warfare in Iraq. They call forth the Spirit of Life even in the midst of death and destruction. Native American religion expresses the crucial role of animals in our spiritual evolution. One of the most common themes within the Native American creation myths is the idea that there was a mythical period of time when animals could communicate freely with one another and with the first human beings. These animal ancestors were revered by the humans for their spiritual wisdom and common sense, which persisted in the naming of human clans after their sacred animal predecessors. In this version of creation, **humans learned from animals**.

Anthropologists use the term *animism* to label the variety of so-called “primitive” beliefs that there is an invisible but powerful force that underlies the physical world as we experience it and that somehow connects us with other creatures. “Native American elder David Monongye wrote a letter to the United Nations, urging the leaders of all nations to consider the wisdom of obedience to what Native Americans call our ‘original instructions.’ He advised, ‘The original instructions of the Creator are universal and valid for all time. The essence of these instructions is **compassion for all life and love for all creation**. We must realize that we do not live in a world of dead matter, but in a **universe of living spirit**.’” [Michael W. Fox, in McElroy, p. xvii]

“**A universe of living spirit.**” Animals connect us with a universe that is **alive**. Our animal partners are attuned to sensory events that overlap with ours, but we must also understand that their perceptions are not identical to ours. The Disney version of our relationship with animals is to portray them with **human** attributes and human physical traits. As charming as these human-like cartoon characters may be, they prevent us from recognizing that animals are **unlike** us in significant ways. In his book *The Souls of Animals*, Gary Kowalski argues that animals have souls because they “are aware of death, know right from wrong, experience love, and are conscious of themselves.” [Guerrero, p. 146] To me these are human criteria that have been superimposed on our animal kin. It might be just as appropriate to wonder about the criteria that **animals’** might apply to us humans to determine if **we** have souls!

Our relationship with animals embodies our Seventh Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. They also teach us how to live fully in the moment. Diana Guerrero says that her relationship with her beloved dog named Clyde taught her this:

Love deeply, because it is all that matters.
 Greet those you love with enthusiasm.
 Make time for loved ones before anything else.
 Don't forget to love yourself.
 Forgive quickly and move on.
 Be loyal to family and friends.
 See the good in everyone and enjoy the interactions you have.
 Make others smile.
 Play every day.
 Go for walks.
 Take naps.
 Enjoy your meals.
 Pay attention to the moment.
 Do your best no matter what.
 Make mistakes and try again, because that is how you learn.
 Be the first to make up. [Guerrero, p. 143]

What more can we add to this list, except to say: **Treasure life in spite of its limitations.** This is the timeless wisdom we share with our animal partners, and which they share with us each and every day. Whenever we rescue animals from suffering and death, we are also rescuing the part of ourselves that cherishes life in all of its variety: as plants and forests, as rivers, as the whole living planet we are blessed to inhabit and which we alone among all the creatures of the Earth can save. We will save our planet one living creature at a time.

I have asked Marilyn Nash to tell you about some of the organizations in our area that are dedicated to rescuing animals, and after that we will take our monthly special collection on behalf of one of these organizations.