

Interdependence Is Mutuality

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By the Rev. CJ McGregor

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We celebrate the web of life,
its magnitude we sing;
for we can see divinity
in every living thing.

So we sang in gathering this morning, calling ourselves to be present to one another, as well as to the animal kingdom, or as the poet, Denise Levertov, put it, “the animal presence.” The Earth itself has been a focus of our seventh principle activities for some time, as it should be. But we take time in our worship this morning to recognize our relationship with the other creatures who walk this Earth with us – and in particular, with our animal companions. I have had animal companions for most of my life. Dogs when I was growing up – including one poodle from hell, and a St. Bernard from heaven. I had a wonderful little black cat, Midnight. Her presence was always special for me and she was like a dog in a cat suit. In her earlier days she would play fetch. She often met me at the door when I got home (having heard the school bus stop), she was very social, and she loved to sleep on my lap. When she was ill and unable to be herself for the last few months, it was a merciful and painful decision to send her off to kitty heaven (where I am positive she went). Now, as many of you know, we have a dog, Our chihuahua Thomas . Thomas does what he wants when he wants, but for the most part, he just wants to be loved – and he does not like having us out of his sight. He is a close companion, a canine friend whose life we love to share.

Our animal friends, in many ways, keep us grounded, connected with our own animal nature, for we may be at the top of the food chain, but we are still a part of it. We are as much a member of the animal kingdom as our cats and dogs and hamsters and gerbils and turtles and fish and birds. And when we get to sit with a cat in our lap or a dog at our side, we can feel a companionable connection; feel the soul of every creature against our hearts. Today’s service theme derives from the life and work of that radical Christian monk, St. Francis of Assisi. I say radical because he was not one for reciting creeds or worrying about correct dogma. He went into the world and saw God, the divine, everywhere. All existence, he said, is sacred. He knew that humans and animals are

interdependent and is a loving mutuality. His special bond with animals has been recognized and celebrated in the Roman Catholic tradition on St. Francis Day, October 4th, each year for many years now. And given our own, let us say “broad,” interpretation of religion and the life of the Spirit, as well as our acknowledgement of our interdependence with the web of all Life, many Unitarian Universalist congregations have adapted and adopted – as we do today – the St. Francis inspired ritual called, The Blessing of the Animals.

When I was 20 a friend of mine tricked me into taking his cat. He asked me to keep it while he went on a trip for several weeks. When he came back, I told him: “I think I’m going to get a cat now.” “Why not keep this one?” he asked. Orange, short haired, slender, lively and cute, his name was Yoyo. He would leap up toward the ceiling and bounce off the walls, or race down the hallway, pounding the hardwood floor as he leaped. That’s why he named her Yoyo. He did this in the middle of the night. That’s why he wanted to give him away. I was not such a light sleeper, so he didn’t bother me as often as he had bothered him. In any case, his nighttime disruptions were a small price to pay for the entertainment value of his daytime playfulness, and for his companionship. I changed his name to Gyro. A few years later, when I was traveling out of town, Gyro became ill. The friend who was caring for him alerted me by phone and took him to the veterinarian. His lungs were filled with fluid, and he passed away. I was out of state when this happened, so I never saw him again. I felt sad for a long time. Cats. We human beings have bred felines into docile, miniature versions of their ferocious relatives of the wild. Cats come in a variety of colors, shapes, and hairstyles because we have engineered it that way. Countless cat books and websites reveal the knowledge of cat breeders, veterinary scientists, animal behaviorists and experienced handlers. We know a lot about cats, yet much remains a mystery. Many of us value their company, and we joke about their selfish expectations that we should care for them. Newspaper cartoons may speculate what goes on in their heads, if much of anything does. Yet much about cats is a mystery. Some people tell amazing stories about them.

Oscar is a cat who lives in a nursing home. Not as a patient—he grew up there. He lives on the third floor, where people with advanced cases of dementia can receive extra care as they near the end of life. He has free reign of the halls. One day, he sleeps atop a desk in the doctors’ charting area. He opens his eyes and looks around. Mrs. P. is wandering down the hall, pushing her walker in his direction. Oscar hisses, but Mrs. P. doesn’t notice. He hops to the floor, has a drink of water, and makes his rounds.

[He] sidesteps Mr. S., who is slumped over on a couch in the hallway. With lips slightly pursed, he snores peacefully Oscar continues down the hallway until he reaches ... Room 310. The door is closed, so Oscar sits and waits. He has important business here. Twenty-five minutes later, the door finally opens, and out walks a nurse's aide carrying dirty linens. “Hello, Oscar,” she says. “Are you going inside?” Oscar lets her pass, then makes his way into the room..... Lying in a corner bed and facing the wall, Mrs. T. is asleep in a fetal position.... [Her cancer is in its final stages. Sitting nearby is her grown-up daughter.] “Hello, Oscar,” [the daughter] says, but he ignores her. He jumps on her mother’s bed and examines the patient. [After a while, a nurse comes in, Oscar sniffs the air, hops off the bed and goes down the hall. He goes in the open door of another person’s room. In this room,] Mrs. K. is resting ... in her bed, her breathing steady but shallow. She is surrounded by photographs of her grandchildren and one from her wedding day.... Oscar jumps onto her bed and again sniffs the air. He pauses to consider the situation, and then turns around twice

before curling up beside Mrs. K. One hour passes. Oscar waits. A nurse walks into the room to check on her patient. She pauses to note Oscar's presence. Concerned, she hurriedly leaves the room and returns to her desk. She grabs Mrs. K.'s chart off the medical-records rack and begins to make phone calls. Within a half hour the family starts to arrive. Chairs are brought into the room, where the relatives begin their vigil. The priest is called in to deliver last rites. And still, Oscar has not budged, instead purring and gently nuzzling Mrs. K. Thirty minutes later, Mrs. K. takes her last ... breath. With this, Oscar sits up, looks around, then departs the room so quietly that the grieving family barely notices.

The story of Oscar appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Dr. Dosa writes that Oscar has the ability to predict when a patient will die. In his first two years, Oscar “presided over the deaths of 25 residents of the third floor.” This enables the staff to notify loved ones to come and say goodbye. In 1997, Dr. David Dosa wrote an article about this cat living at a nursing care center in Rhode Island. Since then, he’s written a book, *Making Rounds with Oscar: The Extraordinary Gift of an Ordinary Cat*. Oscar is like a furry, four-legged Grim Reaper, with a tail. I wonder why he does this? He visits when someone is near the end of life, and after they die, he departs. Apparently he doesn’t snuggle up with just anyone who could use his company. He shows up for the time of passing, and he leaves. I wonder what he gets out of this behavior? He’s a cat. Oscar’s not a human being, so we should be cautious about giving human explanations for this gift he seems to have. Dr. Dosa says he’s an ordinary cat. I wonder if other cats have his gift. If other cats were to grow up in a nursing home, would they behave the same way? It’s a mystery. It makes me think of the mystery I would contemplate when I looked at my cat Yoyo sitting beside me. “What’s going on in there?” Perhaps there is much to learn about animals. For example, we have learned that pigs are smarter than dogs, and that dolphins and whales communicate with others of their species by underwater songs. Yet the more we learn, we realize that so much about animals is a mystery. Oscar the cat can predict a person’s passing within an hour, better than people can— even better than the doctor who writes about the cat. I wonder what Oscar senses at our passing. What is happening with us? The transmigration of the soul? Our spirit heading to heaven? Are we giving off the vibrations of comfort and safety? Is there a special smell at the time of death, and Oscar is waiting for a whiff? To me, the lesson of all this is one of humility. If there is more to animals than we know, if there is more to discover about their complexity and their sensitivity, then we must work to respect them, treat them kindly, and protect them. This goes for animals in the wild, who need us to preserve and restore habitat. It goes for animals on the street, victims of the pet overpopulation problem, and for birds in the trees, who suffer predation by the cats we might allow to roam outside.

We can keep in mind the livestock and think of the animals that we put to work. We can respect the mystery of animals by the practice of kindness and mindfulness, by awareness of their life and advocacy for their needs. And let us remember the mystery of our own species, the mystery of the human animals. Consider Oscar the cat’s uncanny observation of a dying person. Something is happening in us that only a cat knows! Oscar knows us better in this respect than we know ourselves. There is more to us than we know. There is more to learn about ourselves and about one another. Let us keep learning, with humility, curiosity, and patience. May we stay open to new understandings of ourselves as individual human beings, and may we remember our place in the family of all beings.

Now is the time for a ritual of blessing for the animals and commitment for ourselves in relationship to the creatures of the world. In a moment, the two of us will recite a blessing based on the words of Jean Howard. If you brought a picture of an animal, living or departed, you can hold that picture up. Or call to mind the animals you wish to bless. Animals live in our homes They sleep on our window sills, graze in our pastures and follow us on quiet padded feet. We provide them comforts of shelter, food and affection And they offer us love and unconditional contentment. Let us thank them for these precious gifts. Let us praise Creation for these precious gifts. And let us be reminded of our duty not only to our pets, But also to their wild relatives... Which pull nectar from large blossoms, Lie in mud the color of chocolate And wait for the flutter of wings or the silent movement of fins. They also are dependent on us To preserve their homes— The forests, deserts and oceans— Our common world of nature and ecology. Let us go forth committing ourselves to acts of responsibility. Let us go forth remembering our blessings.

May it be so.