

First Unitarian Church

Feb 12, 2023

Reading: "The Creation of Pets" (author unknown, widely shared, available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Nr7muBnCXDqOxpmwRY5c5lippWGkwye87jB4BRsoEn8/edit?usp=sharing>)

That's a reading that, like most scripture, has been shared widely but the author is unknown.

And as we say of many religious stories, I think we can say of this one, "I don't know if it really happened, but I know that it's true."

This sermon topic was a winning topic in last fall's social justice auction. I think it's such a sweet subject, one that is fun to think about. It also raises moral questions, and I'll speak to those as well.

The title, "the Souls of Animals," sounds like a forgone conclusion. Animals have souls. But that's been a subject of a lot of debate, and a fair amount of belittling and ridicule as well. In the world of western science, animals have usually been treated as biological machines: things to be studied and experimented upon. Western philosophy has described human beings in special terms that are specifically meant to set us apart from animals: as self-aware, spiritually oriented beings that are uniquely capable of altruism – doing something for the good of another and not for yourself. Humans have sophisticated language, and free will. Animals, not so much. That is the difference. Or so it has seemed for a long time, to the western world. And if anyone argued that animals feel love, grief, embarrassment, or that they think about their own death, that person was accused of anthropomorphizing. Of trying to make animals people like.

So has that actually changed? I think it is beginning to. It seems like we are at the cusp of something really interesting, a new technology, that could radically shift our consciousness. I'll come back to that in a bit.

First, do animals have souls? Well, that begs another question: How would we know? Which in turn begs another one: What is a soul?

What is a soul? That's a tough question. It's one for which our Unitarian Universalist faith does not have one direct answer. I've often shared that I think of the soul as the part of people that is not made up of physical parts. Our stories of our lives are not made up of physical parts. Same with our love for others. Our hopes, our dreams. Our awareness that we are alive and have a self—or seem to—in this world. When we speak of soulfulness, what we speak of has to do with those things. But is there even more to it? Is there something—a soul—that was pre-existing, before we were born? And that will endure after? And if it does endure, is it like a drop of water that merges back into the ocean, and becomes indistinguishable? Or is it like a star that takes its place in the sky among all the other stars?

We just don't know. And since we don't know, I'm not sure how we could ever say, in a strictly factual way, who has one.

So we need another approach. One that has to do with the qualities of experience that gives rise to the whole idea in the first place.

Whatever we think its technical aspects are—whether it exists forever or not, whether it is created by the mechanisms of the mind or by some other esoteric force—the concept of soul, like all theological concepts, arises from lived experience. It reflects a part of our existence, that is not adequately described by the language we've developed for body and mind.

Experiences like when you are in the presence of something beautiful and you're moved by it—not just up here in our heads, but here in our hearts, and all throughout our bodies if that awe gives us tingles.

And experiences like, when you lose yourself in something—in a piece of music, a story, or art; or when you come to church and find yourself moved to tears without quite knowing why. Then you are in experiencing a connection happening with what we have come to call your soul.

And we experience that connection when relating to another... soul.

My old dog Vega died last August. She was a thirteen-year-old Great Pyrenees, which for that breed is equivalent to being about 105. Eighty pounds of soft white fur and gentle disposition, with beautiful black rimmed eyes. So much white fur. When she walked through a beam of sunlight you could see it sprinkling off her like a salt shaker. I still miss her all the time. What I miss is not a big dog-shaped fur shaker. But the *being* she was, who was part of my family. Not a thing, but a being.

In the twelve years we spent together, I had a sense not just of *what* she was, but *who* she was. A quiet, mostly patient being who had likes and dislikes. She never thought fetch was very interesting. She did like to rip the guts out of a soft toy to find the squeaky bit, with a ruthlessness that was in stark contrast to her usual easy-going nature. She got grumpy when she saw everyone getting ready to leave the house. She was sad when I left overnight for church conferences, and would watch for me by the door. Whenever I returned, she pressed her forehead against me in a special way reserved only for reuniting after a long separation.

One day, I replaced Vega's usual dog food with a new kind that was made from salmon. I set the dish down in front of her and walked away. About 60 seconds later the food was gone and she was standing in the hallway staring at me with, and this could not have been more obvious, a look of awe and wonder on her face. She could not believe what had just happened, and she was coming to share that with me. When she was dying, I kept vigil with her, just as I would with any family member.

A few weeks later, I read about new work scientists have been doing to decode animal speech.ⁱ It uses some of the same technology that gives us speech recognition for voice to text and

translation apps. The same machine learning can analyze the patterns in animal sounds, breaking it down into smaller and more distinct parts than our human ears can detect. Using algorithms, this technology has already been able to tell one animal from another, and to distinguish different dialects of animal speech within the same species. Naked mole rats, it turns out, have a lot to say. According to scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research in Germany, when two naked mole rats meet in a tunnel, they exchange a standard yet complex greeting in a pattern of soft chirps. Each one has a unique voice, and each colony has its own dialect that is passed down over generations. In times of social change, such as a colony's queen being forcibly removed and replaced, a new dialect takes hold. This kind of research is taking place at multiple universities and labs in multiple countries. It has been applied to rodents, fruit bats, lemurs, whales, pigs, crows, and chickens. Researchers are especially interested in the syntax and semantics of whale communication. And—get this—they can now use machines to talk back to the whales. To generate new whale speech that is not just pre-recorded, but sounds real. It raises the possibility of being able to communicate with whales in their own language.

Michael Bronstein is a machine-learning expert at Oxford and part of project called the Cetacean Translation Initiative, or CETI. He says, "At some point, it might be a real dialogue... As a scientist, this is probably the craziest project I have ever participated in."

Crazy because it once seemed impossible, right?

And crazy because nothing shifts our consciousness like a conversation with someone who has an inner world and culture that is different from ours.

Even in the absence of a Google translate for whales and other non-human critters, it's obvious that animals are sentient beings. And though there are differences among us, those differences are a matter of degree. Perhaps some are more sentient than others, but all are beings. Human beings are not as exceptional as was once thought. Human beings are one of many kinds of beings.

Ethically, sentient beings should not be treated as just a means to an end. Yet, we humans do treat them that way. For decades now people have raised the alarm about the immorality and cruelty of factory farming. Many of us will remember seeing videos recorded by activists who sneaked into factory farms. Lobbyists for the industry got laws passed making that kind of activism illegal, but we know that things have not changed much. And it isn't just bad for the non-human animals who live there. Factory farms contaminate the water supply, affecting humans and other life forms down river, they create foul smelling air pollution that ruins nearby communities, and they are unhealthy for the employees who work there.

Other times, we treat animals as an inconvenience, ruining their habitats to make room for more people things. Epidemiologists have warned for years that as the wild spaces get smaller, and people impose more and more on other animals, we will see a greater number of new viruses crossing from other animals into humans, likely causing more pandemics.

Treating any part of creation, human, plant, or other, as merely a commodity to use up or get out of the way has gotten us into deep trouble as a species. In Unitarian Universalism, our seventh principle is “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” We recognize, and have for a long time, that our fate is bound up with that of the planet and our non-human neighbors. That’s why when we built this sanctuary, it was the first LEED Platinum house of worship in the state of New Mexico—that’s the highest level of environmental design. It’s why the wild area east of our social hall, which you can see out these windows, is a certified wildlife habitat. You might have noticed that it gets a little messier than other areas of the campus, with dead plant stalks staying up through the winter, and that kind of thing. That’s because it’s not just for people. It’s for critters who enjoy the seeds and shelter those plants have to share. And the plants benefit too, for example, when the critters help spread those seeds or control the plants’ pests.

These may seem like small gestures in the grand scheme of things. But when faced with overwhelming moral problems, such as being born into vast harmful systems not of our own making that are hard to avoid, it’s important to start with our own sphere of influence.

Out there, in the whole wide world, is the big sphere. Giant things. Things in faraway places that we probably can’t directly impact. But because everything is connected, we can find an issue out there that we care about, and we can kind of zoom in closer to see our spheres of influence. That’s where we can actually have an impact. You can impact the animals around you by making little habitats or planting a few things they enjoy, by changing your diet, by taking action that impacts our local environment. Our church’s Earth Web group has lots of ideas for how to do that, including in this current legislative session. We can start with what we can do. I met my dog Vega at Animal Humane. Adopting a stray or rescue animal is another way to pitch in.

And for other ideas, we have another group here at the church. Our Animal Advocates group. In fact, I think many of them were at that social justice auction where this sermon topic was chosen. The group started over a decade ago, in 2010. Sharon is one of the group’s founders and leaders. And after all these years, she is stepping down for it, and wants to invite others to get involved to carry it forward. So to conclude today’s message, I’ve invited her to say a few words about what kinds of things they do.

¹ Anthes, E. (2022, August 30). *The animal translators*. The New York Times. Retrieved February 10, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/science/translators-animals-naked-mole-rats.html?searchResultPosition=3>