

## “If I Could Talk to the Animals”

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October 8, 2006

When I was a very little girl,  
one of my very best friends was our dog Winky.  
Winky was such a beauty, half-husky and half-golden retriever.  
She had a soft golden face and belly and a dark husky back.  
She was a sweet dog who loved to lie down  
and let me rest my head on her stomach.  
She loved to run, too,  
and she was smart enough to know  
that if she was outside and we offered her a dog biscuit,  
it meant that we were trying to get her to come in  
and if she didn't feel like coming in  
now was the time to turn around and run!  
I know that drove my parents nuts,  
but I always loved that free spirit in her.

Winky was our friend, our playmate,  
and our comforter when we were sad.  
I used to look into her great big, brown doggy eyes and pet her  
and wish I were like Dr. Doolittle,  
who could talk to the animals just like talking to people.  
But we communicated well enough when the subject was love.

One day not so long ago a friend of mine came over with her baby  
daughter. I wondered how this little girl would react to my cat Pippin,  
but her mom assured me she knew about cats and found them very  
interesting! Pippin saw her first, because she was in one of those sporty  
strollers with kind of steep canvas sides to it. I saw him looking curious,  
still relaxed, not quite sure what to make of this little creature. Then she  
caught a glimpse of him, and her face changed in a flash.

Her eyes got big and alert,  
her mouth dropped open.  
She leaned forward against the seatbelt  
and stretched out her hand.  
Pippin froze and just looked at her.  
Their eyes met.  
And if you've ever seen that kind of electric exchange  
you might wonder how anyone could ever have doubted  
that animals have spirits just the same as we do.  
In fact I should really say "non-human animals,"  
since we're animals too, aren't we?

When I look at other animals,  
it seems so clear to me  
that they are just as full of life and spirit as we are.  
Think of that parrot who said, when he was being left at the vet,  
"Come here. I love you. I'm sorry, I want go back."<sup>1</sup>  
He sounded just like a person, scared and reaching out.  
How could we say he's not like us?

Think of Mary Oliver, the poet who asked questions about the soul:  
"Why should I have it, and not the anteater  
who loves her children?  
Why should I have it, and not the camel?  
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
What about the blue iris?  
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?  
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
What about the grass?"<sup>2</sup>

Some of us talk to trees and grass,

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<sup>1</sup> Clinton R. Sanders, *Understanding Dogs: Living and Working with Canine Companions* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), pp. 122, 130–31, 133. The conversation with Koko is reprinted from Francine Patterson, "Conversations with a Gorilla," *National Geographic* October 1978, pp. 438–440.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, "Some Questions You Might Ask."

moon and stars.

Almost all of us talk to other animals  
and yearn for them to understand us.

We have an intuition, an inner feeling,  
that other things out there are filled with spirit,  
just as we are.

Yet this idea hasn't always been popular in Western culture. In the very first chapter of the Hebrew Bible, God gives humans the right to rule over all other animals. At the beginning of Genesis (1:28) God tells the first man and woman to "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." To subdue the earth and have dominion over all the other creatures here with us—well, that's one way to understand who we are. This kind of thinking says we're at the top and we have the right, even the duty, to control other living things. It's easy to see how we've abused this idea. Every paved-over prairie and clear-cut forest is a silent witness that human dominion has not been so good for the rest of the world.

Sometimes dominion has a benign face. In its friendly form, when we see people really trying to make good decisions for other creatures, we call it "stewardship of the earth." Stewardship is when we take on a responsibility for running things in the best interest of all creatures. That's not exactly a bad thing.

But it's not the whole story either. Stewardship still depends on the idea that humans have the right to run the world for its own good. And I'm not sure that's always such a good idea.

Think about how you would feel if your neighbors walked right into your house one day and said to you, "Wow, when's the last time you dusted in here? And did you get your exercise in yesterday? You know the doctor says you need it! And those houseplants—they're looking pretty sad! Are you sure you're using the right kind of fertilizer?"

If our neighbors tried to pull that on us, we might understandably get pretty ticked off. Who do they think they are, barging in and trying to tell us how to run our lives? It's patronizing; it's treating us like we're little children who don't know any better. It's talking down *to* us, not *with* us. And that's not so different from the attitude we sometimes take with animals both wild and domestic. Of course it's not bad in itself to want to protect other creatures. But when we assume we have the God-given right to control the lives of animals for their own good, we're kind of like those nosy neighbors who think they know what's best for other people.

Now, even as I say this, I feel my own ambivalence.

What about zoos? I want to say.

Isn't it good to protect animals in zoos,  
especially endangered species who might otherwise disappear entirely?

What about farm animals?

Is it wrong to raise animals for their meat and milk,  
especially animals who have been domesticated for thousands of years?

And what about my own beloved pets?

Is it wrong to give them a home and keep them safe?

There's no one right answer to these questions.

I think we all agree it's right to preserve endangered species.

But what about those individual animals,

members of endangered species,

who live out their lives behind bars

and never get to go where *they* want

or eat the food *they* choose?

I went to the zoo when I was in Chicago

and saw all these amazing, beautiful creatures,

and I wished I could ask them,

“How's life here in the zoo?

Are we treating you right?

Are you happy here? Would you rather be somewhere else?”

I think it's right that I take care of my own cat  
and keep him safe from the cars in the neighborhood,  
though I watch him staring out the window  
at the ducks down in the canal outside,  
and I know he'd rather be free to come and go as he chooses.

It's not wrong to want to protect the creatures we love.  
But maybe we also need to take a deep look  
and acknowledge that the animals in our lives might sometimes make  
different choices for themselves, if they could,  
and those choices might be good ones too.  
We do the best we can to love and care for the animals we love.  
But we should never forget that they are their own beings.  
They exist in themselves, just as we do,  
and they have a right to live *their* lives, just as we do.  
The lives of animals have value in themselves,  
just as our human lives have value.  
The sheer glorious diversity of life is a value in itself.

Up to this point I bet most of us could agree.  
We love to express our love for the earth and all its creatures.  
At this church, we say we value diversity among people  
and among all the species of the earth.  
But once again, when you get down to the details, it's hard!  
How do you value a cockroach?  
How do you celebrate an alligator?  
How do you love the AIDS virus,  
which has destroyed the lives of people we love,  
and which is also a fellow creature?<sup>3</sup>

Maybe you say to the AIDS virus,  
“I choose to protect human life over your life.

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<sup>3</sup> See also David Bumbaugh, “The Sanctity of Life,” preached on September 25, 1994 at the Unitarian Church in Summit, NJ.

I am making the conscious decision to destroy your life where I can,  
but I am sorry we can't coexist together,  
and I honor the life force that is trying to live in you."  
How would *that* feel?  
Could we do that?

Maybe you say to the alligator,  
"I don't want you to eat me,  
but humans are meat-eaters too,  
and you probably don't want me to eat you,  
so even though you look so scary and different,  
I guess we have something in common."

Maybe you don't step on the cockroach in your kitchen.  
Maybe you scoop it up and put it outside  
and say to it, "I respect your right to exist,  
though I am not willing to offer you hospitality in my home!"

It's not so much that other animals can literally understand our words;  
it's about honoring them  
and treating them as fellow beings,  
not objects.

I think again of how it was when that little girl  
locked eyes with my cat Pippin.  
In my imagination that electric moment was all about  
life communicating with life,  
spirit bowing to spirit,  
even when the forms spirit takes are wildly different.  
This is what it is to be in relationship with animals.  
Sometimes it's easy because we have so much in common.  
Our beloved dogs and cats put their heads in our lap  
and that moment of friendship and connection runs very deep.  
But there are moments, too, when I have to bow to the instincts in my  
cat that I will never really understand.

I see him snarling and wrestling with his catnip toy,  
and it's cute, but you know he'd rather have a real mouse  
or a bird, trembling in shock and terror,  
and that would not be very cute at all,  
though it's part of his cat nature.

Part of living respectfully with other animals  
is respecting their own nature,  
even the parts of them are hard for us to understand—  
like what drives a cat to toy with a mouse,  
or like snakes, spiders, alligators—  
the animals we fear,  
the ones who would feed on us if they got the chance.  
Can we bless them too?  
They too are living out their nature.

May we have eyes and ears to appreciate the spirit in every creature.  
May we be a blessing to the creatures with whom we share our lives.

May it be so.  
Amen and blessed be.