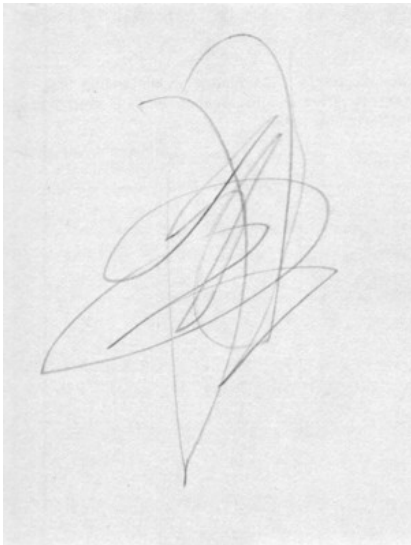


“The Spiritual Life of Animals”

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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton
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Part 1: Music and Art



Today we are talking about animals
and I'm going to talk about drawing for a little bit too,
as you can see from the picture up on the screen.
We have paper and pencils to pass out
in case any kids or adults feel like drawing.
Is there anyone here who would like to draw pictures right now?
If so, just raise your hands and Tory will come around
to bring you paper and pencils.
At the end of the service we have a bulletin board set up
in the fellowship hall to display your drawings
if you want to share them too.
Not a have-to—just if you want.

Take a look at the drawing on the screen here.
What do you think—do you like it?

Personally I'm not a huge modern art fan,
but I kind of like this drawing.
I like how it fills up the page—it's very confident.
There's a story behind it too. In 1982,
an art professor from Syracuse University named Jerome Witkin
was invited to take a look at a portfolio of drawings
by a local "mystery artist."
He said, sure, sounds intriguing, why not?
The drawing you see here was one of the ones he was shown.
Here's what he had to say, and I quote:
"These drawings are very lyrical, very, very beautiful.
They are so positive and affirmative and tense,
the energy is so compact and controlled, it's just incredible....
I can't get most of my students to fill a page like this."

Guess who the artist was?
Any ideas? Anyone want to guess?
The artist who so impressed this art professor
was an elephant, a fourteen-year-old Asian elephant named Siri
who lived in a zoo in Syracuse.¹

Has anyone ever seen elephant paintings before?
Here's a picture of an elephant painting.



This is a baby elephant who's just learning.
In the wild elephants draw in the dirt, with sticks.

¹ Gary Kowalski, *The Souls of Animals* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), pp. 68–69.

But they like painting with human-made paints and paintbrushes too. As far as we can tell, elephants like to draw and paint for just the same reasons people do.

It's creative. It's a way to express yourself.

To me, that is part of spirituality—finding ways to express yourself and create something beautiful.

And why shouldn't other creatures?

They have eyes and ears and skin and taste and smell—they are open to the beauty and amazingness of the world just as we are.

Why shouldn't it touch them too?

By the way, elephants aren't the only animals who draw.



Some gorillas and orangutans and monkeys like to draw.

Chimpanzees really love drawing, and some of them are very good at it.

The chimpanzee you see here is an artist named Ivy.²

She lives in a wildlife sanctuary near Shreveport, Louisiana.

Chimpanzees each have their own style, just like people.

In fact, back in the 1950s, there was a chimp named Ally who liked to do very high-energy spatter-painting.

One of the humans who worked with her

took one of her pieces to an art appraiser

and told the guy, "This was done by a talented friend."

He took one look and said,

² See http://www.nola.com/arts/index.ssf/2009/10/actress_jessica_lange_visits_n.html.

“I knew Jackson Pollack was coming back!”³

These animals, our brothers and sisters, create art just as we do.
Other animals make music, just as we do.
Our brothers and sisters the birds sing all the time.
Lots of birds make up different songs.
They’re creative, just like human composers.⁴



Humpback whales compose their songs too.
This is really an amazing thing.
If you listen to whale song, you find out
different groups of whales sing different songs.
Each group sings the same song, but each group is different.
And the really cool thing is, the songs change over time.
Little by little, the whales change what they’re singing,
so that it really varies over time as well.⁵
To me that says whales are musical artists too.

And if you think this sounds silly—
if you think only human music is really creative,
think about this—even Mozart once said he had no idea
where his melodies came from. They just floated into his head.
He said, “*Whence and how* they come, I know not;
nor can I force them.”⁶

³ Kowalski, pp. 69–71.

⁴ Kowalski, pp 58–60.

⁵ Katy Payne, in “Whale Songs and Elephant Loves,” *Speaking of Faith* radio program, January 21, 2010.

⁶ Quoted in Kowalski, p. 61.

Part 2: Love and Loss

Now I want to talk about love for a little,
and I want to invite the kids, or the adults who feel like drawing too,
to draw a picture of an animal you love.
Does anyone else need paper and pencils?

So: are we human beings the only creatures who love?
Are we the only ones who grieve for our dead?
We can't ever really know what's going on inside another creature,
but from the outside looking in,
it sure looks like some of our animal brothers and sisters feel love
just as we do.

The zoologist Konrad Lorenz studied birds who mate for life,
and in his opinion bird relationships are better and more loving
than a lot of people-relationships.



This is a jackdaw.
Jackdaws are birds who mate for life,
and they live a very long time for birds, up to 15 or 20 years even.
And just like some people, they seem to fall in love at first sight.
I want to read you what Lorenz says about them,
because it is so sweet:

...[H]ardly ever separated by more than a yard,
the two make their way through life.
They seem tremendously proud of each other,
as they pace ponderously side by side....
And it is really touching to see how affectionate
these two wild creatures are with one another.
Every delicacy that the male finds is given to his bride
and she accepts it with the plaintive begging gestures and notes
otherwise typical of baby birds.
In fact, the love-whispers of the couple
consist chiefly of infantile sounds,
reserved by adult jackdaws for these occasions.
Again, how strangely human!
...[And] even after many years,
the male still feeds his wife with the same solicitous care,
and finds for her the same low tones of love,
tremulous with inward emotion,
that he whispered in his first spring of betrothal and of life.⁷

And I just want to say, that sounds like love to me,
and if our people-marriages are that good
over the course of a lifetime,
I think we'll be doing about as well as *we* can hope to do!
Not every species is like this,
but some are, and to me that says we are *not* the only creatures
who know how to love.
We are not the only ones who give our hearts up to another creature
and embrace all the joy and the suffering that comes from love.

And we sure are not the only ones who feel sad
when someone we love dies.

⁷ Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring* (New York: Crowell, 1952), pp. 158–159, quoted in Kowalski, pp. 96–98.



There's a wonderful biologist named Katy Payne.
She's the one who learned how humpback whales change their songs.
She has also studied elephants,
and she tells another story about elephants that really spoke to me.
This is a sad story but it is very beautiful too.
One day she and her team were observing a group of elephants
in a clearing in the forest, a sort of gathering-spot
for all these different elephant families.
They saw one of the baby elephants looked very weak and sick.
She was very ill.
She lay down on the ground, and in a couple of hours she died.

Katy Payne and her team felt very sad,
but they kept watch for two whole days.
They saw over 100 elephants pass by the dead baby elephant
lying in that clearing. None of them were related to her.
But every single one of them reacted in a way
that looked like concern or alarm.
Katy Payne says, "About a quarter of them tried to lift the body up
with their tusks and their trunks,
sometimes trying over and over again.
One adolescent male attempted to lift up this little corpse 57 times,
and walked away from it and came back 5 different times."⁸

⁸ Payne, in "Whale Songs and Elephant Loves."

If that is so, how could we possibly think
we are the only ones who are complicated enough to mourn death
and to wish death did not have to be?
How could we possibly think that?
I find it unspeakably comforting to think of all of us creatures
in sympathy with one another.
I don't think we are so different from other animals.
We are all in this life together,
all facing the tremendous mysteries of life and death,
love and loss.
If that's not spirituality, I don't know what is.

Part 3: Right and Wrong



The last think I want to talk about
is what it means to know right from wrong.
If you are drawing pictures today,
you might want to draw a picture of a person
being good to another animal. What does that look like?

And if you are just listening today, I would ask you,
are human beings the only animals with a sense of ethics,
what's right and what's wrong?

I used to think so.
But my ideas really changed
when I heard what my colleague Gary Kowalski has to say about this.
He asks, what does it mean to be ethical?
What does it mean to be a moral being?
It is true that, as far as we know,
we humans are the only species that formulates theories about ethics,
why we should do some things and not others.
But he asks, do we really need theories to be moral?
He says, “Presumably, people were caring
and considerate of one another
long before they developed complicated moral philosophies.”⁹
And I have to agree with him.
Morality and ethics don’t begin with philosophy.
We develop philosophies to explain *why* we are ethical beings,
but ethics begins with a basic response of care for other beings,
that instinct almost all of us have
to help somebody when they’re in need.
And if you agree with me that that’s the basis of morality—
an instinct to care, an instinct to help—
well, then we have a whole lot of company in the animal world.



The bird you see here is called a roseate tern,
and it lives in the northeastern United States.

⁹ Kowalski, p. 85.

Many years ago a biologist was collecting specimens of bird life, back in the days when “collecting specimens” meant killing them and carting them home.

This biologist shot and wounded a tern, and it fell into the sea.

The other terns hovered around their companion.

The wounded bird started to drift toward the shore.

But before the man could reach the bird,

two of the other terns flew down to the wounded bird.

They each grabbed hold of one of its wings

and lifted him up and flew out to sea about six or seven yards.

The weight of the bird was very heavy,

and that’s as far as they could manage.

But then two more terns swooped down and carried their companion

a little farther, and then two more carried him a little farther,

and so on, until they reached a rock out in the sea

where they could land, and they set the wounded bird down there.

The man really wanted his specimen, and he waded in after it.

Then the whole flock of terns swooped down on him,

blocking his path, while two more terns carried their wounded friend

even farther out to sea.

And with that, at last the man found his heart touched.

He let them escape.

And he reflected, it would be a better world if human beings could always be as kind and brave as those birds had been.¹⁰

Can we accept that animals are spiritual creatures just as we are?

Some of them create art,

many of them love and mourn,

a great many of them will help their companions

at great risk to themselves.

And I wonder:

what does that say about what they deserve from us?

The very last thing I want to tell you about is

¹⁰ George Romanes, quoted in Kowalski, pp. 89–90.

three changes I've made in my life
about how I relate to our animal brothers and sisters.
My husband and I have a cat whose people name is Pippin.
(I don't know what his cat name is.)
The first thing that's changed for me is,
I no longer say John and I own him.
(I mean, any cat person will tell you, nobody can own a cat anyway!)
But seriously—Pippin is our cat,
just as John's my husband and you are my church,
but I don't own him any more than I own my husband or my church.
We are his people just as much as he is our cat.
Our human laws tell us we have the right to sell him if we chose,
not that we ever would,
but in my mind the greater law of spiritual truth
says no creature can own another.
All we can do is belong to one another,
through ties of love and kindness and trust and mutual respect.
That realization has been a change for me.

The second change I made a few years back is about the food I eat.
I'm not a vegetarian,
but I have promised myself to buy free-range meat and eggs
and organic milk and yogurt whenever I can.
Free-range meat is more expensive, so we eat less of it,
but that trade-off is worth it to me.
I don't want to support factory farms,
which treat animals so cruelly.
In my household,
we talk about eating happy chickens and happy cows.
If I'm going to eat an animal,
I want that creature to have had a good life,
with fresh air and room to move and food it likes to eat,
because that's what I'd want for myself.

And the last thing I've tried to do is to support those people

who are working to make sure wild animals have enough habitat,
enough room to live their lives in peace.
So many animals are running out of room
because we are taking up too much room.
We have a right to live here on the earth,
but so do our animal brothers and sisters.

I hope you too will do everything you can to protect
the home we share, this beautiful Earth,
so that all the animals can live in joy and peace.
May we use our power for good and not for evil.
May we be humble and grateful to be sharing this world
with such wondrous fellow-creatures.
May all beings everywhere be well and free from suffering.

So may it be.
Amen.