

Limitless Love...
Palomar UU Fellowship ~ October 2, 2005
Rev. Dr. Beth Johnson

We come together to acknowledge, to celebrate and to bless our kinship with all life, and in this acknowledgement, celebration and blessing we name our responsibility to care for all of creation –for all of the animals, those that live with us and those we never even see.

But what does it mean to bless? Do Unitarian Universalists do that sort of thing?

To bless means to declare something holy, to consecrate it, to praise it, to keep or protect from evil or harm. And so I would say, “yes,” we do that sort of thing. To live out our seventh principle to “respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” we must declare holy the life that pulses through all beings on this planet, to celebrate that life and to protect it from unnecessary harm.

We will bless those beings by story and declaration!

It is fitting that we hold this blessing in the sanctuary. In the place made sacred by our worship, by our community, by the sharing of our joys and sorrows.

Sanctuary is a “holy place, a building set aside for worship” We hold all life sacred and so we sanctify that life here and now.

Sanctuary is a place of refuge and protection; “a reservation where animals or birds are sheltered, and may not be hunted or trapped.” We are in this sanctuary and that is what I hope that we all will be, that this is what the earth will be - a true sanctuary where all animals are cared for, allowed to live their lives as they are created to do.

We are here today to tell our love stories....

To celebrate our kinship with all of life – especially animals - the winged ones, the scaly ones, the feathered and furry ones.

We’re here to celebrate and bless the companion animals with whom we share our lives, and I want also to acknowledge our kinship with those animals who live their lives in their natural environment, and especially to acknowledge those who suffer confinement on factory farms.

We are here today to tell love stories...and to bless those who so richly bless us.

It is right and good that we should tell these love stories because they constitute the very fabric of our lives, and without such love we would be impoverished indeed; for we cannot love too much.

In the words of Charles Hartshorne, “it is our loves that make us anything worth mentioning.” (And Hartshorne himself well understood and appreciated the subjectivity of animals. He was not only a philosopher, but also a renowned ornithologist. He was first to posit and publish the fact that birds sing at times for sheer enjoyment.)

My own love stories began when I was a child. I was raised with a remarkable German Shepherd named, Duke. A loyal, smart, and gentle dog, and an integral part of our family, from Duke I learned the joy of companionship. When I was a small child my mother would let me sit on the front porch with Duke. She’d pin a note on me that said, “Do not touch child, dog will bite.” When I wandered off the porch one day my mother needed only to call for Duke and I trailed right behind him. I would feel his heavy body leaning against my leg as we sat together in the living room...just there...leaning.

Duke was my mother’s dog though, through and through. He wanted nothing other than to please and protect her and her own. One day while stroking Duke in a quiet moment, Mama began to coo, “I love you, I love you.” To her shock, Duke began to vocalize “raw raw roo.” Duke would only do this with my mother. My aunt heard it one time when Duke was particularly straining to say, “I love you.” My aunt was moved to tears at Duke’s efforts and my mother was spooked this

time too, so clear was Duke's vocalization and desire to please. My aunt said, "Oh, my God, Jane! Don't do that!" And Mama didn't, for a long time.

From this first deep relationship I began a deep kinship with other animals.

What struck me then and impresses me now is the bond that we all shared.

It is important to acknowledge that animals' worth comes not from the enjoyment that they bring humans, however much we do enjoy each other, but from their own subjectivity - their own beingness.

UU minister, Gary Kowalski, writes, "The living world is responsive and charged with feeling, which flows like a sympathetic current between all sentient beings. Other creatures... can be astonishingly complex and subtle. Their emotional lives are nuanced with moods that range from grief and sadness to gaiety and glee. Their family structures and relationships can be as intricate and their bonds with one another as strong and tender as our own."

Animals are not our property or possessions, but our peers and fellow-travelers. Like us, they have their own likes and dislikes, fears and fixations. They have plans and purposes as important to them as our plans are to us. Animals not only have biologies; they also have biographies. We can appreciate the lives of animals, but not appropriate them, for they have their own lives to lead."

And our companion animals' lives are intimately bound up in our own. They depend on us for food, shelter, and love, and we ourselves are ennobled when we are moved to love them.

In the book, *A Cat Named Darwin: How a Stray Cat Changed a Man Into a Human Being*, biologist William Jordan, who understands life from the evolutionary perspective, describes the process of love in biological and neurochemical terms. He uses this perspective when he speaks of being attuned to his cat, Darwin, of conversing with him through stroking him and developing a strong bond.

Eventually the cat began staring intently at Jordan. Of this Jordan writes, they don't do that until they've bonded. When that happens, you are soul mates. You are one." In responding to a question about his speaking about Darwin as a spouse Jordan said, "It's the love thing. Yes, it's the same brain machinery. It's all about evolution, and evolution is about kinship, and kinship is about love."

Once we are aware of animals as beings with feelings, depth and worth, we begin to open ourselves to loving them and, hence, to compassion for them. Compassion then leads us to take action on behalf of animals. I suggest that one move we can make is to work for legislation that redefines the relationship between companion animals and the people who care for them, from a relationship of ownership, which designates animals as property, to naming the caregivers, "guardians," and another is to call for the end of confinement in factory farms.

We cannot care too much for animals, as if there is only a finite amount of love in the world and of which we are capable. Love is limitless. While we may be limited in what we can *do*, love itself is limited only by our imaginations, our awareness, and our openness to being touched by another – of whatever species. When we feel our connectedness with all things we tap into the source of all Love and Life and evermore love flows through us to all beings in and through the web that holds us all tenderly. The more fully we love and care for others – all beings – the more fully we become who we are called by love to be...

And so...let the blessing begin!