

**“ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL”**  
**Or**  
**“THINGS YOU CAN LEARN FROM YOUR DOG”**

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**Good morning, everyone.**

**The subject of today’s talk is the ethical and moral relationship between human beings and animals or, as some might refer to it, between human and non-human animals.**

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was an English poet and philosopher and a major influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American transcendentalist and Unitarian Minister. One of Coleridge’s most famous poems is entitled “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” It is the story of a sailor, the “Mariner”, who kills an albatross after that bird had guided his ship out of the dangerous fog in the Antarctic seas. Because of this act, the ship and its crew were cursed with calamity and death. And for that act of cruelty, he was forced by the angry crew to have the carcass of the dead albatross tied around his neck.**

**Finally, during a lonely calm surrounded by the dead sailors on the rotting deck of the ship, he suddenly realized the beauty of the sea creatures surrounding the ship – the creatures whom he had earlier dismissed as “a thousand thousand slimy things”. Now, he thought:**

***“O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware”***

**And, in that moment of enlightenment, the albatross fell from his neck and he was saved from death. He felt compelled, nonetheless, to spend the rest of his life recounting the tale and the lesson he had learned to all who would listen – how we share this precious earth with other creatures that have equal rights to enjoyment of the gift of life.**

**In the poem, this ancient mariner is telling his tale to a passing wedding guest who becomes fascinated by the long tale. The Mariner offers these memorable words near the end of the poem:**

***Farewell, farewell ! but this I tell  
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!***

*He prayeth well, who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.*

*He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.*

Thus Coleridge defines, for us, a spiritual bond between humans and animals.....A sacred relationship.

I drew the title of today's sermon from the BBC series of the same name. Many of you may recall that series produced in the late 70s and early 80s. Based upon the writings of British veterinarian Alf Wight, it recounts the life of veterinarians, farmers, townspeople, and animals in the Yorkshire Dales section of England. My wife, Cynthia, and I loved these stories so much that we took a vacation in the Dales, visiting the town of Thirsk where Alf Wight's practice was located, roaming the area by train, bus and foot to take in the agrarian peace and beauty that still remains there.

"All creatures...." was particularly adept at showing animals realistically and in all their facets - as sources of income and sustenance for farmers and their families, as working partners in trades, as pets to amuse and bring joy to the young and young-at-heart, as sources of comfort for the old or infirmed, and as beings who experience pain and emotions much as humans do. But more importantly, it frequently showed that where man's inhumanity to man manifested itself, so did cruelty to animals. They shared a common origin in a place of anger, ignorance, greed, and fear.

The show also documented that period in post-World War II where the demands for meat and dairy consumption and advances of technology was pushing farmers towards the impersonal model of the factory farm. Symbolically, where cows were heretofore given names of flowers like "Rosie," "Daisy," "Buttercup" and "Petunia," they now became "No. 1," "No. 2," "No. 3" and "No.4."

And, so it began.....

So what is our ethical and moral relationship with all animals, and why is the consideration of this relationship so important? Let me start with the latter question first, why this is important. I offer three possible reasons:

First, defining this relationship will offer us guidance on how we deal with the animal rights issues that seem, now, to confront us almost daily. As Unitarian Universalists we, and others, are frequently asked to act on behalf of animals, sometimes in the context of

ethical eating, perhaps to save a particular species, or maybe to just add our voices against cruel or inhuman use of animals in any context.

But why, how and when do we respond? What is our responsibility and where does it rank in terms of importance to other social justice issues? How should our seventh principle, “respect for the interdependent web of all existence” manifest itself in dealing with animal rights and welfare? Does our celebration of “the sacred circle of life” include all animals?

Our antidote to the daily horror of animal abuse is, too often, I think, a forced and purposeful intellectual blindness. We will not see. Is ignorance the salve that protects us from sharing the pain of our fellow creatures and acting on their behalf?

As Ralph Waldo Emerson once noted: “You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.”

Second, I believe defining that relationship will offer each of us a truer understanding of who we are, as human beings, by forcing us to deal squarely, openly and unequivocally with the issue of animal rights.

And, thirdly, I ask you how are we to further a more peaceful society if the horrible and pervasive violence of animal abuse is allowed to continue?

So how does each of us answer the question of our relationship? Well, I believe that Unitarian Universalists resolve these ethical or moral questions by using three “tools”:

- First, the power of reason, the mental ability of humans to derive conclusions from facts, observations – to take the rules of logic and apply them so as to develop probable truths. It is at that moment that we are all philosophers.
- Second, the power of love, or the ability to apply our spirituality to augment the judgments of reason – to call upon our “inner voice”, our moral intuition, or our “moral compass” for guidance. And it is at that moment that we are all poets, lovers, and artists.
- Third, the strength of courage to bring what we resolve through reason and love into tangible action. It is at that final step that we are all prophets, heroes, and shapers of the future.

So let’s begin with the first. What does reason tell you about animal rights?

Despite 2,000 years of philosophical debate, there remain strong voices on both sides, and no consensus that I have been able to uncover. But let me discuss the three philosophical questions that I believe are relevant, and let’s see where your powers of reason take you.

The first philosophical question that arises is based upon whether we believe that animals experience pain, pleasure, joy, anxiety, depression – the characteristics that we ascribe to being alive? If so, then philosophers agree that animals have what they term “moral standing.” And if they have moral standing, then philosophers agree that they have rights of some sort, and that violating those rights is immoral.

Put another way, is it wrong to slaughter a pod of whales simply because it angers humans, or is it morally wrong in and of itself because it violates the whale’s rights due to it’s having moral standing, that is, being alive.

Are animals “alive” as we are alive or are their responses simply mechanical or programmed or robotic. And are the feelings we sense in animals merely interpretations based upon what we observe in humans? Are we just being sentimental? If many animals, particularly mammals, did not resemble us in so many respects – two eyes, ears, a nose, hair, limbs – would we feel the same? Do we see, or not see, what we choose?

Do you believe all or some animals exhibit the characteristics of being alive even, perhaps, on a less-sophisticated scale than humans, but alive nonetheless? Have you then deduced that animals have moral standing and, like we humans, they therefore have certain rights, not necessarily the same as, but analogous to, those “inalienable rights” of humans. The right to life? The right to freedom? The right to live their life according to the natural order of things? Or have you concluded that animals are objects, things, like a rock or a tree, and they exist solely for our utility, to be used as we each wish.

Where do you stand? Where has reason guided you?

The second philosophical issue is one of anthropocentrism, or human-centered. The human-centered philosopher argues that human beings are so far superior to animals in every respect that the consideration of animal rights in any manner analogous to human rights is absurd. They argue that we alone have rational brains, can use complex language, and are self-aware. Our cognitive skills are far superior. Using these observations, they conclude that animals exist solely for our own utility – they should be regarded as things, objects. And moving beyond this conclusion, they then argue that it is totally acceptable, for example, to subject millions of animals per year to pharmaceutical testing with half of those being subjected to pain, and only 25% of those given anesthesia, because it yields benefits to man – it may save human lives, relieve human suffering, or extend our life by a few years, perhaps. That is what is going on. As Carl Sagan reportedly observed, “How smart does a chimp have to be before killing him constitutes murder?”

Human-centered philosophers also argue similarly that the raising and slaughter of tens of billions of animals every year in horrible conditions, subjecting calves and pigs to a lifetime of confinement, crammed between the boards of a wooden shed, or chickens in a dark,

**filthy cage, is completely necessary and morally justifiable for the efficient and affordable feeding of human beings.**

**The biocentric philosopher notes, on the other hand, that our definition of superior is simply that – OUR definition. The so-called “superior” human being kills for sport and pleasure, routinely engages in genocide, hates, seeks revenge, behaves cruelly, is avaricious and consuming, and accumulates more resources of the earth than it can ever use.**

**Whereas the so-called “inferior” animals can fly, breathe underwater, build intricate hives and webs, migrate over thousands of miles, exhibit color, grace and beauty unmatched by any human, and, as many believe, can express affection and loyalty more truly and deeply than some humans.**

**What do you think? Where do you stand?**

**The final philosophical argument may be characterized as one of “kinship”. The pro-animal-rights philosophers argue that our biological and behavioral similarities are so great that it is illogical to draw such a distinct line between humans and animals. We share 96% or more of our DNA with chimps. The functioning of the nervous systems is identical with many animals. The appearance of the human embryo at the very early stages often cannot be differentiated from that of a horse or a pig, for example. The list of similarities is long and startling, and growing all the time as we learn more about animal neurobiology and behavior.**

**They use the term “speciesism”, arguing that our preference for humans over animals is analogous to placing human needs above those of the environment, placing male above female, placing race above race, or culture above culture.**

**On the other hand, anti-animal rights advocates dismiss biological similarities as having no moral significance and, as to behavioral similarities, they argue that animal behaviors are grossly minimal, simplistic and inferior. They claim that speciesism is a “red herring” designed to raise passions and divert attention from the truth.**

**Where do you stand? Do you agree that we are kin to animals? That they are part of our family?**

**Now, that was reason, the first tool in our UU decision making. What does the second tool in your decision making take you – the power of your spirituality – the power of love. What does love tell you? In what direction does your moral compass point you?**

**During my early years, I resided in South Philadelphia, and in my neighborhood were several slaughterhouses – referred to in their signage by the more delicate term “abattoirs”. On one sunny summer afternoon, when I was about the age of ten, one of my**

friends came running into the corner candy store and pinball arcade where I was enjoying my day hollering “Hey, there’s a horse runnin’ loose down Second Street”. “No, idiot, that’s a cow” came another voice. A steer had escaped from one of the slaughterhouses, on the wooden ramp leading from the delivery truck, and was leading the police and slaughterhouse employees on a chase through the run-down urban landscape followed by a trail of excited kids, now including me.

At about fifteen city blocks from where the steer had broken loose, the police had lost their patience and the commander ordered the police to kill the steer. In a hail of bullets from every police officer on the scene I watched the steer fall and die on a vacant neighborhood lot.

There were many occasions over the intervening years on which I recounted that story to family and friends from the “old neighborhood”, perhaps embellishing it from time to time, watching it grow into an urban legend. Trading memories. It was just an old story, a youthful recollection, like so many others shared with family and friends.

It was not until a short time ago, upon giving more considered thought to the question of animal rights, that I recalled the scene again, but this time in vivid detail. I allowed myself to “see” – to remember.

I saw and heard the steer snorting out of breath in the final standoff with police.

I saw the fear in his behavior as he turned his head in all directions pondering a way out.

I saw his large brown watery eyes enlarged as the animal seemed to sense his ultimate demise.

I saw the police leaning over the piles of rubble, or laying flat on the ground, both hands on their revolvers and I recall hearing the incessant pop-pop-pop of the bullets.

I saw the slaughterhouse workers, standing around their truck which had followed the steer, dressed in waist-high bloodied rubber suits and white paper hats. They were calling on the police to end the bullets – not to save the life of the steer, but so as not to contaminate the meat.

I heard no one pleading to save the life of the steer.

I recalled his front legs caving in under his massive frame and then how he rolled over onto his left side in a fall – and how he seemed to bounce against the hard rubble-covered ground, dust and debris blown up from the earth around him.

I recalled thinking I felt the earth rumble.

I began to wonder what his thoughts were when he first escaped. Could he hear the calls of his fellow steers already undergoing the killing? In his flight to freedom, was he envisioning an open grassy field somewhere, perhaps a spot under a tree where he could

find safety? What terror did that large magnificent animal experience in that vacant lot, feeling his life ebbing away? I began, illogically, I know, assigning human thoughts to his final moments.

And so, at that moment of vivid recollection, I felt like that ancient mariner.... standing in the midst of death and horror, experiencing my personal moment of enlightenment, my revelation, agonizing over the long-ago death of an innocent animal – an animal who has now become part of my psyche – a stain on my memory.

And now, each time my wife comes to me with her pleadings to help save the Alaskan wolves or the New Jersey bears, or a member of our congregation leads an effort for cage-free eggs and ethical eating, I am re-enlightened, re-invigorated. Perhaps I am paying a long overdue societal debt to that dead steer.

So if your reason fails you, if the philosophical arguments for animal rights seem irresolute and murky, then I invite you to call on your spiritual selves. Allow yourself to “see” the horror of how we treat our fellow animals. The information, some of it very graphic, is easily available. And then go. Go where love takes you, and muster that UU courage in the face of injustice, and then take action.

I’ve thought a useful exercise was to imagine those who come after us – twenty, fifty or one hundred years from now looking back on our behavior towards animals much as we now look back on those who engaged in neglecting and abusing the mentally and physically disabled, who put children to work in horrible conditions, who destroyed our environment out of greed, who fought wars of oppression, and who engaged in racism. Imagine, if you will, our descendents, looking back on us, and asking, “Oh God! What on earth were they thinking? How could they have been so cruel? Why didn’t they do something?”

Having engaged our reason and our spirituality we will all certainly not arrive in the same place, after all, we are UUs. What is important is that we each face the issues head-on, fearlessly examine the facts, think through our personal responsibility, and be prepared to act – even to our own inconvenience or detriment – to achieve that higher justice.