

CELEBRATING THE BLESSINGS OF ANIMALS

We gather this day to honor and appreciate our animal companions. We should not attempt to bless them as much as we need to thank them for blessing us. For all the puppies and kittens who have licked our faces, frolicked in the grass with us and shared our days, we are especially grateful. They have made our lives more fun, taught us responsibility, and helped us to not be lonely even when we had no human companions. Some of us have found similar companionship with birds, and horses and other critters, and for them we also give thanks! There are other creatures that make our world better by their existence and teach us many things, but that few of our kind would call friend. For the bison, zebra, deer, antelope, lions, tigers, bear, whales and dolphins and all the other animals, we also give our thanks for the gift of their presence in this world we share.

Our 7th UU Principle calls us to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Many of the religious traditions from which we learn talk about the connections between all things. Our own experience tells us that there is a cycle of life dependent on the rains that fall, the warmth of the Sun, the health of the earth. We depend on farmers who grow food as well as those who bring the food to market. When we are young, we depend upon our parents, and as we age we depend upon our children. Our animal companions depend upon us to provide healthy food and clean water while other animals depend upon us to maintain adequate habitat for them to live. With the billions of people now living on the earth, it has become harder to insure enough open land for the wild animals, so many areas have been set aside as preserves and sanctuaries for the wild animals. Some animals have been captured or raised in zoos and wild animal parks, and though these settings may seem like prisons they do help to insure the survival of many species. Modern zoos are working harder to provide larger more natural areas for their animals to live as well as supporting large animal preserves and sanctuaries in Africa and Australia. Some people seem unconcerned about the plight of animals, but I believe we lose something with every species that goes extinct.

I have always liked animals. I loved to watch the squirrels play on the big elms when I was growing up. I loved to watch the birds, especially the Cardinals and Blue Jays that would come to the feeder in the crabapple in the back yard during the winter. The neighborhood feral cats were fun to watch too, and for a few years one neighbor had some chickens that would get loose every few days. Since the Brookfield Zoo was only a mile away, I remember going there frequently, probably at least once a month on average but usually more often during the summer. Giraffes, lions, tigers, bear, porpoises, elephants, rhinos, camels, bison, monkeys, apes and alligators were all there to see. The Children's Zoo had goats and lambs, and chicks and ducklings, and sometimes some bigger animals. And there were squirrels and ground squirrels that sometimes stole the show from the bigger critters.

Through my lifetime, I have seen herds of bison increase in preserves in Montana and the Dakotas and especially in Yellowstone National Park. I love to see the Bison and Elk in Yellowstone. Some closer parks to us here, Yosemite and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks are also amazing, with those old growth Sequoias and all the animals that live in those parks, elk, deer, bear, and various smaller critters. I also love to watch the big birds, the Eagles, Hawks, and Falcons, and the buzzards, Condors, and geese and ducks, and all the Heron and Seagulls and other water birds. In this country we are so richly blessed to have so many different kinds of critters to watch and enjoy. And I don't want to forget the wolves and coyote whose howls offer such an eerie sense of the wild so many nights.

I hope that there will always be animals large and small, wild and domestic in this world to remind us that we are part of an interconnected and interdependent family of being. Without our animal companions, we would miss out on so much. Animals are such a big part of most of our lives, whether we realize it or not.

I hope that you all have enjoyed this Celebration of Animals this morning! Sometimes we forget how important the animals are to us, but what would our lives be like without the cats, dogs and birds in our neighborhoods? We don't have to go far out of town to see cows and horses, goats and sheep.

Without cows and goats we wouldn't have all the wonderful cheeses so many of us enjoy. Cows and pigs, chickens and turkeys and fish provide most of the meat that the meat-eaters enjoy. Horses and ponies, donkeys and burros provided transportation as well as assistance in various farm activities until car and trucks and tractors and other machines replaced most of them. Many people still enjoy riding horses and ponies or watching horse races, so many of these beautiful animals remain on farms.

Our world and our lives are richly blessed by the animals of the world. Each year there is less wilderness to provide a home to the animals of the wild. One of the great challenges of the future is to insure there remains enough wilderness and clean water for healthy populations of lions and tigers and bear, whales and dolphins and otters, elephants and sharks to survive.

Native Americans and other indigenous peoples often honored certain animals as sacred totems. Clans and tribes were named after animals. Animal spirits were thought to challenge and inspire people and many people today have become aware of certain animals that appear in their lives at important times. Buffalo or bison and hawk keep appearing in my life. I have sometimes used the name Buffalo Bob in camp experiences, and Hawk appeared to me one night camping on Sunrise Mountain in New Jersey with a group of campers. I am occasionally stubborn like a buffalo, and I like to see the world from on top of hills and mountains like Hawk might see.

If we try to see the world like the animals do, we can learn a lot about the world and about ourselves! Many years ago Joanna Macy and some friends create a Council of the Animals in which people brought forth the perspective of various animals to consider the state of the world. Perhaps we will hold such a council one of these days, for all humans can learn from the animals!

St. Francis is remembered as Blessing the Animals, and many churches take time for the priest or minister to bless the animals, but I believe that we learn more by taking the time to invite our animal companions to join us so that we can celebrate all the ways that they bless us! Thank you animal friends! You make our lives richer, brighter, and more fun! You teach us so many things!