

**LET ME COUNT THE WAYS ANIMALS BLESS US**  
*Animal Appreciation Celebration*

I was about 4 when we got our first dog, a beautiful tri-color collie who was the pup of my Aunt's show dog Duchess and a local scoundrel who jumped the fence. Flint was a big wonderful playful dog who was with us for 12 years before his heart gave out. He was most loyal to my mother who wasn't at all sure she wanted a puppy, and who fed him, but he would get in the middle to protect us if she was disciplining my brother or me. We all loved animals, regularly visiting the critters in the Brookfield Zoo, only a mile away from our house, summer, winter, spring and fall. As an adult, I have had many dogs and cats for varying lengths of time, and they each had their own personality and they each were good companions.

I believe in the interdependent and interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part. I no longer have much belief in a single divine entity that looks favorably on our nation or tribe, but I do believe that there is a force that connects all things. Call it the life force, the web, or something else, but there is something that connects our energy fields and our strands of DNA. We share some DNA with every living thing that we know of in the universe. All of the molecules that make up our bodies were expelled from stars at some point along the way, we are truly stardust, as are all our two, four and eight footed companions, the birds, the fish, and everything else. And we are all connected.

Today we celebrate the companions that live with us, and the other living beings that share our planetary home. Some we can communicate with well, and others not so much. That our lives are intertwined with the other living beings of our households and our planet is certain. Some animals may seem more important to us now than they did during the lives of our ancestors. Some things, like perhaps mosquitoes and wasps, often seem expendable. But each thing has a place in the global eco-system, and the world would be different if we let them die off completely.

Science has made great strides in understanding how things work, and there are scientists who can explain why even mosquitoes, wasps, coyote, and skunks are important. Did you see the video on the news the other day showing a big black bear romping through a cemetery up in a town near the King fire? There have been several other reports of bear in various places, including Bakersfield recently. Probably not great to see them so close to where people live, but it gives me a little bit of hope for the wild things to see that there are still wild animals around even as humans claim more and more land for housing, farming, and commerce.

The health of natural animal populations declines when big predators like bear, wolves, coyote, mountain lions, condors and eagles have been killed off by intention or accidentally through the release of toxic chemicals into the environment. Where bear and wolves have been reintroduced or protected in Montana and elsewhere, there have been some losses to ranchers of sheep and calves, but populations of deer, elk, and other animals have dropped to more natural and healthier levels. There are balance points in nature where healthy populations can be sustained. Expansion of human farming and ranching should be balanced with the health of wild things! As global human populations continue to increase until at least the middle of this century, it is critical that animal species be protected. We don't really know what will happen as more and more species go extinct, but this recent period of human expansion has been accompanied by one of the great die-offs of geological time. It will take a tremendous effort to keep the rate of extinction from climbing further as pollution, temperatures, and sea levels continue to increase. Corporate efforts to support plausible deniability of human culpability for Global Warming are becoming even harder to maintain. First world corporations, and consumer nations, and especially the US, are the worst culprits.

Religions that emphasize heaven and a better afterlife often exacerbate the problem by giving people both a reason and an excuse for ignoring Global Warming or any other problems in this world. Why worry about things here when heaven will be better and daddy God will fix everything for those that believe.

Corporate leaders have often supported such religious ideas for they exempt even the dirtiest corporate persons from taking responsibility for the environment and the messes they leave. In the Hebrew Bible, the idea of taking care of the environment through good stewardship is a deeply engrained idea. From the origin stories in Genesis, through the laws that call for leaving fields fallow in the seventh year, there is a sense of responsibility for the environment in the Judeo-Christian tradition that is often ignored by the heaven-focused and the money-focused.

As scientists discover more and more value in the diversity of plant and animal species, it is harder and harder to ignore the tendency of modern consumer lifestyles to bring about mass extinctions. The limited protections of animals and plants in recent decades are hardly a balance for the changes in the planet wrought by resource-greedy corporations.

Unitarian Universalists have long been concerned about the natural world, from the writings of Emerson and Thoreau to the evolutionary discoveries of Darwin, we have been aware of the environment and the growth of human populations at the expense of the natural world. In recent years, UUs have sought to remake our congregations and households into Green Sanctuaries, working to mitigate the pollution and decrease our carbon footprint.

So today, as we celebrate the ways that animals bless our lives and thank the animals for the joy they bring to us, let us remember that we have a responsibility to the animals to keep our shared world in good shape. Let us be more conscious of the animals that may cross the road in front of us. Let us give thanks if we eat the flesh or eggs of animals which have been raised for consumption, and let us consider eating lower on the food chain! We share a beautiful global home with all the animals, so let us commit our time and energy to the health of the entire interdependent and interconnected web of existence, for the force of life connects us all!

May the force be with you, and with all the dogs, cats, hamsters, parakeets, turtles, fish, snakes, horses and other critters that live with you, and also with all the wild things wherever they may roam! Peace to all! Amen!