

## **A Celebration of the Animals**

### *And the Ways they Bless Us!*

We gather again today to celebrate the animals, those within our households and those everywhere around the world. We do not presume to bless them, for it is they who bless us in so very many ways. Some humans feel they are separate and above the animals, but each year there is more evidence of how smart and wise animals may be. I won't comment on how often people evidence a shortage of intelligence and wisdom! We are kin to the animals, sharing some 98% or more of our DNA with Chimpanzees, and it is said we also share a good third of our DNA with daffodils! We may currently run this planet, but the cockroaches have been here far longer than humans and will likely be here long after we are gone!

The tradition of Blessing the Animals goes back at least to St. Francis, but native peoples around the world lived in harmony with the animals and chose various animals to name their clans, calling down blessings upon them. Cows are sacred in India and other animals are sacred in other places. Mosquitoes, Ants, Spiders and Cockroaches may not be appreciated by many, but they are part of the food chain for other animals. Some animals are so attuned to certain foods, that even the spraying of mosquitoes and the spraying of pesticides can cause serious disruptions in the food chain. For several years, there has been concern about the death of bees and it is becoming more apparent that some widely used pesticides may be the culprit.

Many of the large mammals are particularly endangered due to the loss of habitat for human housing, business, and agriculture. The burning of South American Rainforests to create grazing lands to raise cattle for McDonalds and other corporations has long been a concern. The loss of trees, which produce oxygen and stabilize the land, is the biggest concern, but the loss of habitat for plants and animals may be causing harms that we do not even imagine.

Increasing human populations and increasing use and abuse of natural resources by humans have thrown the whole earth-community out of balance. We talk about this around earth day each year, but we need to remember each day that what we eat, what we drive, where we go, and what we do all have an impact on the animals and the environment. Our use of lights and heaters and air conditioners, unless they are wind or solar powered, contributes to the heating of the planet by burning fossil fuels and releasing greenhouse gases. The Paris Accords were intended to slow the warming of the planet and eventually decrease the amount of greenhouse gases being released around the world, but even greater changes in human patterns are needed. Several countries now rely on wind and solar power for most of their energy needs, but it will likely be decades before there are really significant changes around the globe or even in the United States. There are hopeful signs as more nations and states push for electric cars, windmills, and solar installations. Some of these changes may come too slowly to help the animals, and even people have a hard time getting out of the way of hurricanes, typhoons, and earthquakes.

For far too long, agricultural needs, human housing and business generally has determined the fate of too many animals. In the West, ranchers were allowed to kill off so many of the bear and wolves that kept populations of deer in check, that their elimination threw the whole ecosystem out of balance. The restoration of wolves in Yellowstone National Park has dramatically changed the ecosystem and made the deer and elk populations healthier and hardier! Ranchers of course are not happy when bear and wolves and bison cross park boundary lines, so some species have lost endangered animal protections and are again being hunted. Eagles and other large birds rebounded after DDT was banned as a pesticide but have been increasingly falling victim to lead pellets in shotgun shells. The first official act of Trump's Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, back in early March, was to overturn the ban on lead shot, but the law passed in California may still take effect in stages. There is no good reason to keep using lead shot or lead fishing weights which leave known toxins in the environment, but the gun lobby has continued to oppose any limitation.

In Africa and Asia, killing of Elephants and Rhinoceroses for their tusks and horns have endangered those species. Lion and Tiger populations are threatened in many areas. Some of these majestic animals may soon only exist in zoos or go completely extinct. Many of the Apes, Monkeys, and Orangutans are endangered, mostly due to encroachment of human populations. Animals around the world are endangered today because of human development and changes to the environment. Many species of plants and animals go extinct each year, and even some of the most beloved animals will likely fall.

The changes we make to our lifestyle, both big and small, can help to make a difference, but the challenge is great and the time is short. We really don't know if there is a point of no-return with the pollution of the earth. We hope that the earth will always be able to recover, but that recovery might not include humans! Even if we are not able to stop storm intensification, changing patterns of rain and drought, and rising seas, our efforts will hopefully help keep things from getting even worse!

Now I want to talk about the animals that are our closest companions, the ones that really become part of the family. For some that includes horses and pigs, various small rodents, birds, lizards, and snakes, but I particularly think of cats and dogs that sit on our laps or next to us or at our feet. There are the cats that wrap themselves around us and try to sleep next to us or on our heads! There are the dogs that take up most of the space on the bed or lie snoring on the floor next to the bed! There are dogs that walk and run with us and sometimes go to work with us! There are cats that expect us, their staff, to meet their every desire, but deign to visit us only on their own schedule, which may or may not include any awareness of our sleep patterns!

Household animal companions can become our closest friends and confidantes. They may hear the things we need to say but can't say to other people. Our dogs and cats may receive the love that we don't dare to offer to others, and the dogs especially are always there to share their love with us.

Sadly, dogs and cats do not live as long as we do. Some of us grey hairs have had many dog and cat companions, some who came into our lives as little balls of fur that developed their own unique personalities, lived out their lives with us and that passed on to whatever may be beyond this life. It was just three weeks ago that one of my doggy companions breathed her last, lying peacefully next to me on my couch. The Unsinkable Molly Brown was born in Florida in Spring 2003, sired by Dudley, companion of my ex-wife's parents, and living with us first in Southern California, where she had corrective surgery by a canine cardiologist and came home running in a blue tape bandage when she was supposed to be resting. She finally slowed down in her 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> years. Molly wasn't the brightest dog I have ever had, but she probably was the most enthusiastic, often from the moment she woke me up to the last out of the night. She had a personality much bigger than her 13 pounds of Maltese breeding would suggest, and that was clear from the day we got the little ball of fluff to the morning she insisted on her walk the day she died. My other dog, Dizzi, and I still miss Molly! Maybe next year, I will tell the story of Dizzi, the Arkansas Brown Dog—Dizzi is short for Disaster, but she has been a really good companion for 11 years now!

Anyway, those dogs and cats that live with us are certainly part of the family, 4 legged children or siblings who will play with us, sit with us, and keep our secrets as we all journey through life. We are thankful for their companionship and we do our best to keep them well-fed, healthy and safe! Today we show our appreciation and we offer them our blessings, but mostly we celebrate how much they bless us!

Woof and Meow!