

“Woof”

Reverence For Life Sunday

Mr. Gary Eberle

April 21, 2002



Fountain Street Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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RESPONSIVE READING

MINISTER: Then the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,

CONGREGATION: and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat;

MINISTER: the calf and the young lion shall grow up together,

CONGREGATION: and a little child shall lead them.

MINISTER: The cow and the bear shall be friends;

CONGREGATION: their young shall lie down together,

MINISTER: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

CONGREGATION: The infant child shall play over the hole of the cobra,

MINISTER: and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

TOGETHER: They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;
for as the waters fill the sea,
so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

(Adapted from Isaiah 11:6-9)

* * * * *

SERMON

I had two cats when I was in college. One I had raised from a kitten that was born when my roommates and I were cat-sitting the pregnant pet of an actress friend of ours who had gone to New York to look for work. That cat managed to shred the sleeve of my roommate's double-knit suit and mysteriously disappeared shortly thereafter. My second cat was a pure black one who would drape herself over my shoulders like a stole while I read at my desk and whose favorite spot when I was trying to write was on the keyboard

of my typewriter. That cat was with me through undergraduate work and part of graduate school and then disappeared one night when I was away, apparently frightened out of an apartment I was sharing with some friends and a bulldog. I was petless for quite a while thereafter, and then we had a fairly neurotic cat in the household until we discovered that my wife did not have a cold that lasted two years but was allergic to cats.

I learned a lot from my cats, more certainly than they learned from me. (Of course, you can't really teach cats anything, because, as they would say, they already know everything they need to know.) Now, in case you dog-lovers are worried that this is going to be a sermon about cats, I should point out that the title of this sermon is "Woof!", so hold your horses, so to speak. But allow me to dwell on cats for a moment. Nobody considered cats more carefully than the little-known but interesting 18th-century British poet Christopher Smart. In his long, rambling (some would say "mad") poem JUBILATE AGNO he considers his cat Jeoffry and in so doing reveals some of the divine aspects of the feline species.

From **Jubilate Agno** by Christopher Smart (1722-1771)

For I will consider my cat Jeoffry.

For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.

For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East, he worships in his way.

For is this done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.

For then he leaps up to catch the musk which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.

.....

For [he] keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.

For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.

For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.

For in his morning orisons, he loves the sun and the sun loves him.

For he is of the tribe of Tiger.

.....

For he will not do destruction if he is well-fed, neither will he spit without provocation.

For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a good cat.

For he is an instrument upon the children to learn benevolence upon.

For every house is incomplete without him & a blessing is lacking in the spirit.

Christopher Smart eventually went insane, but not, I presume, from watching his cat. Or was it just that, after watching Jeoffry for so many years, he could no longer bear being human? In any case, he hit it right on the mark when he said that our pets, cats or other species, are "instruments to learn benevolence upon."

Our animals soften us somehow. They teach us to step outside of ourselves when we are children and to care for another living creature. Often they are the first things we really love, other than our parents. (Most children find their pets easier to love than their siblings.) And once we learn to love an animal, it is harder for us to hate other things and people.

But pets serve another function which we should think about on this day before Earth Day. They provide a link between our domesticated human life and the untamed life of

nature around us. Analytical psychologist Marie Louise von Franz points out somewhere that even though cats have been living with human beings since at least the time of ancient Egypt, we have never *really* succeeded in domesticating them. They endure us, perhaps, in exchange for what passes for cat food, but not very far beneath the surface they remain “of the tribe of the tiger,” fierce, quick, and somewhat ruthless. I used to watch my black cat dream as she slept. I could tell when her eyes were moving in “REM” sleep, and often wondered what she dreamt about? What were the ancestral dreams of cats? Was she stalking a mouse or some greater prey? Or when she would gambol sideways across the carpet, apparently leaping after some kind of imaginary prey, I often wondered if it wasn’t wrong, or at least pointless, to try to turn this creature of nature into a “house” cat. There is something in the cat that is beyond our control, no matter how much they love us. And it is that “other” thing, that still-wild thing that we call its “cat nature” that mystifies and attracts us about cats and the other animals we live with.

Today’s service is called “Reverence for Life.” The English word “revere” is derived from a Latin word “vereri” which means to fear. We use the word “fear” in this sense when we talk of Fear of the Lord, for it doesn’t mean just to be frightened, but more precisely to be awe-struck. There is something awesome in our animals, in our lives, in nature. To see that part of nature is to stare into the “tremendous and fascinating mystery” that is the beginning of all religion. We realize there is something larger than ourselves, something that is both us and not-us, that penetrates all existence and which is striving to express itself through all creation.

In Buddhism, this is called the Buddha Nature. One day the great zen master Joshu (AD 850) was walking along with some novice monks and one of them, seeing a dog nearby, said, “Master Joshu, does a dog have Buddha Nature?” This was what we call, in the trade, a “get the teacher” question.) Without missing a beat, the master shot back, “Wu!” Now the Chinese word “wu” can only be translated into English with several paragraphs of learned explanation, but its essential meaning is “full and absolute enlightenment.” *Satori*, full mindfulness is a synonym for wu in Japanese Zen Buddhism. Wu, as a compound word in the Chinese wu-wei or wu-nien, means the “mind of no mind” or the “action of no action.” Chinese and Japanese scholars have written dozens of books of “wu” over the past hundreds of years trying to get at its meaning. But wu is also, as master Joshu knew, a pretty close approximation of a dog bark. Wu! Wu! The smart aleck monk asks, “Does a dog have Buddha Nature?” “Woof! Woof!” the master replies. “What kind of stupid question is that? Of course the dog has Buddha Nature, so do you, so do I, so does that tree! The same life runs through all things.”

Now, isn’t that a cause for reverence? For fear and celebration and rejoicing? We human beings need to be drawn back continually to our true nature. Our human consciousness often keeps us from our “horse sense” or dog sense, prevents us from understanding what we truly are. We come here today to bless our beasts, but perhaps we should also recognize the blessings that we take from them, for it is they who teach us how to live. We humans have all sorts of bad habits our animals don’t. We eat too much, sleep too little, enjoy life not enough. Animals eat only when they are hungry, and when they are

tired they sleep no matter when or where they are. If we could learn only that much wisdom from our animals, we would be abundantly blessed.

Let's conclude with a few words on animal wisdom from American poet Walt Whitman:

*I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.*

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of year ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

*So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself . . .*

"Woof!"