

Sermon

Don't Pet the Grizzlies

Rev. Julia Older

Romantic poems like the ones in our opening readings, and the romantic nature paintings of the same era, are idealized and florid and exaggerated. I more or less grew up with such poems -- and loved them. And when it wasn't flowery poetry, and idealized pictures, it was gnomes and fairies and fuzzy, furry, talking animals. Disney movies were huge in my childhood; Br'er Rabbit in Song of the South was an early favorite and Cinderella with the very helpful mice. And there were Beatrix Potter's books. And in my own backyard, Mayapples formed what I believed to be fairy rings. Magic worlds seemed to be all around me.

Have you never walked in the forest and felt that the largest, old, gnarled trees have a personality? Even something like sentience?

I thought of everything small and furry as precious. Truth is, I mostly still do. I continue to name the squirrels in my yard when I can identify them individually.

Of course I know that small furry animals may not be cuddly any more than nature is actually good. Beautiful is not the same as good. I even know that reducing nature and animals into cute and sweet can lead to serious errors in judgment.

I read Tennyson's "Red in tooth and claw" statement about nature and I understand. Sort of. But then I tend to drift back into my romantic notions. I routinely attribute human-like motivations to animals. I told you last week about the ground squirrels and prairie dogs I hung out with in the Tetons.

It gets messy, of course. Just when I decide I'll really try to keep it straight, and try not imagine that wild animals process information in the way that we do, I see a U-Tube of a crow trying to get something out of a bottle. Perhaps you've seen it too. He realizes he can't reach in far enough to get what he wants so he

gets a piece of wire, bends it into a hook, and fishes the object out. Studies about animals and problem solving and tools and emotional responses lead me to think we are on a continuum of awareness rather than humans versus everything else. I don't believe we are as unique as we thought we were.

So, what makes humans distinct? Could it be the capacity to empathize? How can we know such a thing?

However, there is no evidence that my dog ever felt bad if my other dog did not get a cookie.

We drove this summer near Buffalo Jump Montana, where for years Native people took what they needed and then Europeans came and thousands of bison were slaughtered and simply left to rot. That was a tragedy.

More recently, folks expended an extravagant amount time and resources to save one whale, who turned the wrong way and got stuck in a bay. That's not right either . . .of course I cheered when Willy was freed, hypocrite that I am.

There is distortion inherent in anthropomorphizing nature. And giving privilege to cute animals over ugly ones. There's no justice in that.

I spent time during the summer learning the names of plants and flowers in the regions we visited. And I spent time identifying stars and constellations, trying to get Cassiopeia and the two bears and the swan fixed in my mind. We looked at stars from the deep darkness of the Teton meadows, with so little ambient light, staring at the heavens like our most ancient ancestors must have done. Almost every night we saw the space shuttle speed across. What a juxtaposition!

I'm aware that learning the names that people give to plants and stars is not the same thing as knowing about plants and stars. Knowing the names of birds doesn't get us one step closer to knowing about birds. We only know a little more about the people who gave them names.

Serious studying and learning about our environment, appreciating how everything is interconnected, may be our saving grace as a specie.

I got started on this sermon when I picked up a book by Gary Larsen in a Forest Ranger store. "There's a Hair in my Dirt!! A Worm's Story."

I trust you all know some of The Far Side comics. "Themes were often surreal, such as "How cows behave when no one watches" or "The unexpected dangers of being an insect." Often, the behavior of humans is compared with that of animals: surrounded by dense fences and houses, a father explains to his son that a bird song is a territorial marking common to the lower animals. . . .One strip depicts a family of spiders driving in a car with a "Have a Nice Day" bumper sticker, featuring a "smiley face" . . .with eight eyes."

As someone who loves to see animals cavorting as people, and vice versa, when I saw the worm book, I had to have it.

It is the tender story of a young earthworm sitting with his family at the dinner table, eating, what else? -- dirt. And feeling terribly unhappy about being a lowly earthworm.

"Dirt for breakfast, dirt for lunch and dirt for dinner! Dirt, dirt, dirt! And look-- now there's even a hair in my dirt! The final insult--I can't stand it any longer! I hate being a worm!"

It isn't easy being an earthworm, and with the little guy so upset, father worm decides to tell him a story. What follows is an ecological fable that combines environmental lessons with . . . off-the-wall humor. . . . Father worm tells the story of Harriet, a beautiful but dimwitted maiden who is frolicking through the forest enjoying the beauty of nature, but completely failing to understand it. The young earthworm learns that nature is not a cute and cuddly theme park designed for the entertainment of ignorant humans, but a complex, fragile, and sometimes violent system where every creature plays a vital role, even the worm. *[Amazon.com Review]*

Harriet takes a stroll across a woodland trail encountering different aspects of the natural world. . . ."Her ignorance produces some unfortunate results including the demise of a land tortoise which Harriet, thinking it to be a turtle,

lobs back into the pond where, of course, it drowns. . . . The story concludes after Harriet saves a mouse (by hacking to death a beneficial non-poisonous snake) and later rubs her eye. As the vector of a deadly disease, it infects Harriet, who dies, and decomposes above the worm family's home, hence the hair in the dirt.” (*Debra Shumate, Bull Run Regional Library, Manassas,*)

Edward O. Wilson, of genome fame, wrote the book’s preface:

“The point is nature is part of us and we are part of nature. Larson describes what we biologists have known all along, that nature really is red in tooth and claw. While it is true that all organisms depend on one another, the ecological web they create is built entirely on mutual exploitation. Life is tough! There is no free lunch, and what one creature consumes, another must provide. . . .

The point is, we are subject to the same physical laws, still tied to the planet, totally enmeshed in food webs, energy flows, nutrient cycles, predator prey cycles, territorial imperatives, and even slavery of other species, such as cows and dogs. . . . Nature is to be loved, cherished, admired, and yes, poetically celebrated, but above all understood.” (end quote)

Violence is inevitable. Unless you are a plant, you must kill to live. Even if you are a vegetarian, you kill. No escape. Perhaps the rule should be “no gratuitous violence.” “No random killing.”

And what is necessary violence? We have to draw lines somehow. Being nice leads to purely emotional preferences, like Harriet’s -- and having no lines means being unconscious.

Our personal decisions will not be appropriate for everyone else. To insist that everyone be a vegetarian is raising personal preferences into moral imperatives. I say that as a vegetarian myself.

Almost all churches succumb to this in some form. I mean, aren’t we too often smug? Sure that we are on the right side?

What we know keeps changing and we have to keep changing.

The closest statement to a moral imperative I can make is that we should stay awake and keep learning and keep questioning our own values. Asking , “Why?” often -- of ourselves and all the pundits who oversimplify.

Here's one huge difficulty: We need to keep questioning but we must also have a vision. "Without a vision the people perish." We get completely lost. So, we need a vision and we have to keep questioning even our vision. Standing without surety definitely feels uncomfortable . . .and vulnerable. But as the poet Theodore Roethke wrote: "Those who are willing to be vulnerable move among mysteries."

I am excited about buying local and cooking slow food. But even a decision like buying local stirs up questions about workers in far away places and unintended consequences. Does that mean we get off the hook and do what is convenient? Is buying clothes made in China an ethical choice? What about the Chinese workers? Do we avoid buying all Chinese exports? How many of our forebearers worked in factories 16 hours a day not so very long ago?

Who are we to say that villagers in Romania should not have TV's because village life will cease to exist? I have a romantic notion of life in the village. I bemoan the change. But, am I, myself, personally willing to give up TV? Sadly, no. Maybe Netflix would be a good substitute but I try to shop local so I usually go to The Movie Groove.

We have no choice but to make choices. Being passive is a choice. How do we decide? And how do we stay awake to what we are doing?

It is helpful to have a guiding principle for a pole star. Unitarian Universalism has seven. Let's look at two of them. The first of ours is that every human being has worth and dignity. From that, an entire system of law emerges and options like the death penalty have to be considered from a particular point of view. I believe, because of that one principle, the death penalty is wrong. That's one example.

Our seventh principle is that everything is interconnected. Therefore everything we do matters. What a burden! We have never ending responsibility.

Our mission statement here at UUFRC is:

Welcome All! We nurture each other on our personal and spiritual journeys as we work for peace, compassionate justice, and a healthy planet.

Such a pronouncement can help us set priorities for everything else we do. We spent a lot of time eight years ago and again seven years ago when I first arrived discerning how we want to be and refining that declaration.

The second thing we need, after principles, is a safe place to explore and reconsider life and its infinite questions. Having a community that makes us think is important. Of course there is a danger that, since so many of us are progressives, we might support one another right into the same corner. And it might be the wrong corner!

No matter how hard we try to stay awake and live responsibly and keep open to new learning, we'll make mistakes -- some of them pretty awful. And we'll have to keep going. To get stuck in our errors does not serve life. We are trapped in the cycle of mutual exploitation and if that sometimes leaves us with nightmares, it is equally true that new life is always arising. There is enough beauty around us to feel invited over and over into the dance.

The romantic poets and artists were dramatic exaggerations. Furry animals are not merely cute. Grizzlies stretching and rolling about in the sun look friendly. They are not. Don't pet the grizzlies.

A huge dam on the mighty Columbia River that promised such improvement to so many lives, is questioned now by all the progressives for whom Woody Guthrie is still a saint. He is to me. And so is Pete Seeger.

Driving through miles of cattle grazing, I thought about the 4 H'ers who raise a steer and serve it as burgers at the fair. Do we have canine teeth for a reason? We do know it takes an extravagant amount of resources, compared to raising vegetables, to produce meat.

Note to self: Make time to listen to the service we had this summer on ethical eating led by Geri Kennedy. Consider taking her class this fall using the curriculum the UUA published after a lot of study.

Quote: ““Food and Environmental Justice” is personal in nature (involving our free choices of what we put in our own bodies) and global in reach (with implications for ecosystems, human hunger, social inequity, animal welfare, and climate change). We enter this new discussion as a covenantal community, members of the same religious family, promising one another our mutual trust and support. With hundreds of congregations and tens of thousands of

individuals using this Guide, we could learn a great deal about ethical eating from one another if we found a way to pool our growing knowledge.”

We can be completely sure we are right and then new evidence proves us almost entirely wrong, but I have at least one value I don't believe will ever change:

It is very, very important to enjoy being alive.

Be cautious and careful and keep studying and asking questions but always make time to savor and celebrate. We're good at that here. I hope that there is time in every committee to celebrate accomplishments.

I try to take a break and celebrate when I finish a task on the computer. I reward myself with a rousing game of 2-Suit Spider.

I'll speak more about what it is to live in covenant at our Water Communion in September. Meanwhile, here is your homework:

Listen carefully and stay open hearted.
Your own discernment is vital to the process; keep learning.
And, enjoy being here now. Right now.

Blessed be.