

(Dogs?)

This sermon emerged at this time because of the recent tragic death of our one year old beagle, Phoebe. The Board of this congregation sent us a very thoughtful sympathy card, an indication that there are people here who understand the way that dogs are, for many of us, significant family members. I also understand that not everyone appreciates that fact: some consider it weird. I can recall times when members of congregations derided the inclusion of the loss of dogs or cats in joys and concerns.

My father had great discomfort with the fact that I was choosing as my second wife, a woman with TWO dogs. One was tolerable, but two was, in his mind, some kind of perversion. When I told him that Karen and her previous husband actually had four dogs, I had consigned her to the category of unmistakable weirdness in his eyes.

I have always been a dog lover, but I grew up mostly in an apartment and that is not a great setting for dogs. My college fraternity had a German Shepherd mascot, and we bonded. Brandy went home with me for vacations and tended to travel the campus with me. When my first wife, Linda, and I were married, Brandy visited us frequently in the married students housing, until our daughter Lisa's birth. He was not crazy about her, and so visited us less often.

It was Karen who brought dogs into my life on a full time basis, and taught me what real dog lovers were about. I became increasingly aware of the fact that one of the fundamental moral differentiations among people is the existence of those who love dogs, and those who do not.

It is an incontrovertible fact that dogs represent a \$56 billion share of the American economy. Thirty-nine percent of American households include at least one dog, 28% two or more, and there are in toto (no pun intended) something like 89.7 million of them. Some people would say that is a sign of our moral weakness. How can people waste money on animals when there are starving children in the world? That is what this sermon is about.

[the interdependent web]

This sermon relates directly to the seventh Unitarian Universalist principle: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

In the creation myth in the Hebrew Scriptures, we are told that the deity, having created light, and the sky, and dry land, and seas, and vegetation, and sun and the moon, and fish and birds, and earth animals, and then, finally, humankind, he told the humans *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.*

Now that word dominion is a problem. While there are those who understand it to mean stewardship, or responsibility for, the more common understandings are ownership, control, and power. Our culture has taken this to mean that everything that was created was created for us and we have the right to exploit it to meet our needs and desires. (It is, of course, a self-serving myth. It has been noted that it is obvious that it was not written by a horse.)

In fact, turning to the second creation myth that follows the first in the book of Genesis, there are those who believe that it is man, the human with a penis -- not a generic version -- for which the world was created and that women were an afterthought created to serve man.

God, they believe, gave the adult male of the species the right to rule all others. That is what is preached in many of America's largest pulpits. _It's in the book_

The concept of _the interdependent web of all existence_ is a counter to the pyramidal understanding of the world. It asserts that we are part of a system, not its pinnacle, and that our charge is to live in harmony with it, and that we are charged with using our power to respect, steward, and care for the other life forms. Is it our right to exploit less powerful species, or are we charged with maintaining the web? We UU's, of course, opt for the web - we are ecologists -- at least for as long as it requires no great sacrifice on our part.

I want to suggest to you this morning that dogs occupy a significant place in that web of interdependency that we do not understand very well. Some of us have an emotional clue to the meaning of that; others have none at all. I want to offer some insight into the relationship between *Homo sapiens* and *Canis familiaris* that I have gleaned from my reading and my experience, because I believe it offers some clues about the nature of that important interdependent web.

[the history of dogs]

The origin of *Canis lupus familiaris*, the dog, is shrouded in mystery. Stanley Coren, whose book, **The Intelligence of Dogs**, was one of the first I consulted for this sermon, interestingly leaves out the species, *lupus*, because he questions the wolf ancestry of the dog to which that points. Other authorities are in general agreement that the dog and today's wolves have some common ancestors, and so the *familiaris* identify them as a branch of the wolf family. It has been generally agreed that the dog came into being about 14 thousand years ago, but some researchers from the University of California, utilizing mitochondrial DNA research techniques, have recently suggested that the dog parted from the wolf 135,000 years ago. While they agree that the fossil record does not support this dating, they suggest that is because the fossils of the early dogs may have looked a lot like their wolf brothers and sisters.

It is agreed by most authorities that it was domestication by humans that brought about the dog - the dog is a domesticated wolf - others suggest dogs domesticated humans. There clearly was a symbiosis.

It is suggested that humans found the presence of wolves around their camps to be helpful: dogs would have improved sanitation by cleaning up food scraps, they would have alerted the camp to the presence of predators or strangers, using their acute hearing to provide an early warning. Perhaps the most significant benefit would have been the use of dogs' sense of smell to assist with the hunt. The relationship between the presence of a dog and success in the hunt is often mentioned as a primary reason for the domestication of the wolf, and a 2004 study of hunter groups with and without a dog gives quantitative support to the hypothesis that the benefits of cooperative hunting was an important factor. Dogs may even have been valued for their warmth, as suggested by the Australian Aboriginal expression _three dog night_ (an exceptionally cold night).

The wolves would have benefitted from living near human camps—more safety, more reliable food. Camp dogs would also have benefitted from human tool use, as in bringing down larger prey and controlling fire for a range of purposes.

The cohabitation of dogs and humans would have greatly improved the chances of survival for early human groups, and the domestication of dogs may have been one of the key forces that led to the success of *Homo sapiens*.

We can assume that the friendly wolves who hung around with humans began breeding with one another and the dog was the evolutionary result of that inbreeding. Unlike the wild

wolves, the dog became reliably tied to the human communities. The earliest archeological records of what are identifiable as dogs go back 14,000 years - that's 140 centuries.

Later, selective breeding was used to reproduce those who were the best hunting dogs, and guard dogs, and companion dogs. One of those early records is a tomb dated to 14 centuries ago, in which the remains of a young girl were found buried with four dogs facing in the four directions around her.

[human ambivalence]

But it is funny. There has always been a certain ambivalence about the dog among some people.

There have always been people who have affirmed dogs similarity with humans, and those who have accused them of anthropomorphizing, insisting that dogs are simply bundles of instincts and reflexes and have no intelligence and no true feelings. They say, _When people think they see intelligence or feelings in a dog, they are simply projecting themselves into the situation._

Aristotle was among those who believed that the difference between dogs and humans was one of degree and not of kind, when it came to mental abilities. Both have emotions and both can learn from experience - it's just that humans are more complex than dogs. Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle in this as in other ways. He wrote into his doctrines the teaching that humans and animals differ only quantitatively. The troubling, to some, implication of this was that animals had souls, and there were limits as to how one could exploit something that was ensouled. The Philosopher Rene Descartes insisted that dogs are just animate machines with no consciousness, intelligence or any sort of mind, and that is the view that many people prefer today.

To hold that view, however, requires that one disregard incredible amounts of evidence to the contrary. Descartes, himself, had a dog named Monsieur Grat - a pampered pet that, according to Stanley Coren, he spoke to in the way that all dog lovers speak to their dogs. There are recorded in his letters, concerns about the dogs health, about his _likes_ and _Dislikes,_ and speculation as to what the dog was thinking. As Coren says, _So much concern for an unconscious machine?_

The scientific studies about dogs' loyalty, about their learning, about their reasoning, about their communication skills - both receptive and transmitting, about their joy and their sorrow, are so extensive as to defy rejection as mere projection by dog fanciers.

[The Weissbard/Wells dogs]

Let me tell you about our dogs.

Our dog Murphy was born on January 13, 1984. He was supposed to have died as a puppy because of a congenital eating disorder that made it impossible for nourishment to stay in his stomach. When he was given to Karen, he was the size of a baby rat. She saved him by carrying him in her basket and feeding him throughout the day with spoonfuls of food small enough that he would not choke. He attended graduate school with her - and learned a lot.

Karen and her then husband, Richard, acquired Clara, a mate for Murphy, and Murphy became the father of eight, two of which they kept while the other six were given to family members and carefully checked-out friends. When Karen and Richard separated, she got Murphy and his daughter, Chelsea, and Richard kept Clara and her daughter Emma.

When Karen came to join me in Rockford, Murphy immediately adopted me. In a matter of days, Karen discovered that, if I was home,

Murphy was reluctant to go outside if I did not accompany him. Wherever he was sitting, he would keep an eye on me. When I was late coming home, he would stay up to wait for me. When I got up early on a Sunday morning, he would have to accompany me to the shower and then to the door, and would only return to bed when he knew I was out of the house.

I did not immediately take to the idea of the dogs sleeping with us, but within a couple of weeks, there they were. Murphy would always start the night by getting under the covers and rolling into my body.

My favorite story about Murphy's intelligence is about the time we were outside our cottage at Chautauqua and some teenagers came along. They admired Murphy and I testified to his intelligence. I said to him, "Murphy, go in the house and get your ball." Murphy jumped up, ran into the house, and came back with his ball.

There were people who predicted that once Hilary arrived, the dogs would be squeezed out. Little did they know. Hilary grew up thinking of Murphy and Chelsea as her brother and sister, probably because they received close to equal treatment. They were always fully present and thought of as members of the family.

At one point, Murphy suddenly became very deaf, and his behavior changed. The vet noticed that the left side of his face was sagging, evidence of a probable stroke. Over the course of a year, Murphy visibly failed. It became very difficult for him to get into bed and we had to lift him. He began walking into things, and walking into corners and just staring like he was in a trance. He stopped eating much and lost ten pounds. It became clear that the quality of his life was ebbing fast. Because he was, after all a dog and not a person, we were able to treat him lovingly in a way people are prohibited from treating their human loved ones, and his suffering was ended peacefully. We buried him in our back yard and planted a tree over him.

Karen was at the vets with Chelsea when she saw a posting about a cocker spaniel who was not fitting in with his family. And so we acquired Snickers who, we discovered, had been a pet store dog, and I suspect, had been abused by the boys in the previous family. We came to love him, but he was a trial. We affectionately referred to him as our "Devil-Dog."

When Chelsea was 15 ½, it became clear that her life had become a trial for her, she just kept walking around the dining room table, so we decided that we had to set her free.

Several months later, I was picking Karen up at the school at which she was teaching when one of the other teachers saw that we had a cocker spaniel. She, in fact, had two and was needing to cut her pack in half. We took Luke for a trial week. It happened to be New Years, which was when we did an annual Open House for members of the Rockford congregation. Luke found himself in the middle of a couple of hundred people and pulled the audition off with class. He was probably the most dignified and self-contained dog I have had the privilege of knowing. He was, as you can see, a very handsome guy.

The Spring after we moved to Canton, Hilary's school bus driver

noticed the cockers on our lawn and announced that his family had a new litter of cocker puppies. Karen and Hilary went to see the puppies, and next thing I knew, we had added Cecily to our family.

Snickers died at 14 ½, when he developed heart problems, and then Luke developed spinal problems and was very miserable, so we put an end to his suffering. So then there was just Cecily. Karen was concerned about Cecily being an only dog, and Karen was grieving the death of her mother, so a year ago we found Phoebe, an 11 week old beagle puppy. We discovered beagles are not like Cocker

Spaniels. She was full of spunk and had tremendous energy and just radiated a joi de vivre. We had one problem which was that she was not easily confined. While we had an enclosed dog yard in the back, twice she got out our front door and I had to chase her down the road at 35 miles an hour. Sadly, she got out the door as we were having a new dishwasher delivered early in January and we could not get out the door fast enough to catch her and she was hit and killed by a car.

We were devastated. Seeing our grief, Hilary started searching on the internet for a puppy for us. We applied to two shelters, filling out the detailed paperwork to see if we would

be fit puppy parents, but we did not hear back from them. Then Hilary found a brand new Craig's list posting for cocker spaniel puppies in Antwerp, near Watertown. And so, Hannah came into our lives. She is a beauty and a lover. She fit in immediately, but then, two Sundays ago, her third day with us, she developed diarrehea and when we called the vet the first thing Monday morning, they had us take her to the clinic where she proved to have the Parvo virus, which is often fatal to puppies. She spent five days in the clinic receiving iv liquids and drugs, and Karen drove to Watertown to get blood plasma with anti-bodies for Parvo.

Hannah is a fighter and a week ago Friday, we got her back. And she is an absolute delight, responding to her name and already house-broken at seven weeks, and has learned to sit. [I won't tell you what the clinic stay cost us.]

I recount all of this, not because our dogs were somehow unique in all the world. I must note that each of them was different from the other as my four daughters are. It was a matter of our bonding, but many of you have in the past, or in the present, also bonded with dogs, and have known in your heart of hearts that as uncool as it is to say so, a dog is not property - not something you own. They are beings with whom we are fortunate to share our

lives. There are people who treat dogs as badly as they treat spouses - they do not recognize the value of either.

[what dogs do]

In his wonderful book, **Dog's Best Friend**, Mark Derr wrote:

The best dogs are those who add depth to our lives, be it as workers, aides to our mobility, guardians, or, especially companions . . . Those of us who know and rely on dogs do so because, like people throughout the ages, we cannot conceive of not having them with us.

Over the years [he says] I have met doctors, lawyers, business executives, artists, laborers, housewives, homeless people, retirees who describe their dogs - be it large or small - as their best friends. Cliche though the phrase has become, freighted as it is with enough cultural baggage to break a strong dog's back, it nonetheless refers to an emotional condition that seems quite normal to me. The dog walks with them, attends them while they work, garden, or sit reading - usually by knocking closed the book or magazine and demanding to be petted. It helps them through depression and loneliness. . . . Just as significant, the dog demands nothing more than food, exercise, attention. It is as unambiguous in its desire and devotion as any being can be. At its core, the relationship between human and dog is an uncluttered one involving two distinct animals who just happen to understand each other at a basic level. That more than a few people end up preferring dogs to humans can come as no surprise.

[interdependency]

The interdependency of dogs and people is closer to the surface in many ways than our interdependency with other forms of life, and yet, even here, we are ambivalent. What is our responsibility? How do we accept it? Are they mere toys in our hands, to be dealt with only on our terms, or are they to be respected and cared for, and loved as beings with a worth and dignity of their own?

One of the illustrations of how they impact our lives is from the column that John Grogan wrote in the Philadelphia Inquirer about the death of his dog Marley. The column was so popular that it became a book, **Marley and Me**, which became a New York Times bestseller.

Grogan wrote, describing his:

walk down the hill with a shovel at dawn and how odd it was to be outdoors without Marley, who for thirteen years, had made it his business to be at my side for any excursion. And now, here I was, digging him this hole. . .

I gave a lot of thought to how I should describe him and this is what I settled on: "No one ever called him a great dog - or even a good dog. He was as wild as a banshee and as strong as a bull. He crashed joyously through life with a gusto most often associated with natural disasters. He's the only dog I've ever known to be expelled from obedience school.

Marley was a chewer of couches, a slasher of screens, a slinger of drool, a tipper of trash cans. As for brains, let me just say he chased his tail till the day he died, apparently convinced he was on the verge of a major canine breakthrough. There was more to him than that, however, and I described his intuition and empathy, his gentleness with children, his pure heart. . .

A person can learn a lot from a dog, even a loopy one like ours.... Marley taught me about living each day with unbridled exuberance and joy, about seizing the moment and following your heart. He taught me to appreciate the simple things – a walk in the woods, a fresh snowfall, a nap in a shaft of winter sunlight. And as he grew old and achy, he taught me about optimism in the face of adversity. Mostly, he taught me about friendship and selflessness and, above all else, unwavering loyalty.

It was an amazing concept that I was only now, in the wake of his death, fully absorbing: Marley as mentor. As teacher and role model. Was it possible for a dog – any dog, but especially a nutty, wildly uncontrollable one like ours – to point humans to the things that really mattered in life? I believed it was. Loyalty. Courage. Devotion. Simplicity. Joy. And the things that do not matter, too. A dog has no use for fancy cars or big homes or designer clothes. Status symbols mean nothing to him. A water-logged stick will do just fine. A dog judges others not by their color or creed or class but by who they are inside. A dog doesn't care if you are rich or poor, educated or illiterate, clever or dull. Give him your heart and he will give you his. It was really quite simple, and yet we as humans, so much wiser and more sophisticated, have always had trouble figuring out what really counts and what does not. As I wrote that farewell column to Marley, I realized it was all there in front of us, if only we opened our eyes. Sometimes it took a dog with bad breath, worse manners, and pure intentions to help us see.

In the same vein, as I was preparing for this sermon, I discovered a new book available on my Kindle called **The Dharma of Dogs: Our best friends as spiritual teachers**. It's an anthology edited by Tami Simon of 31 selections mostly by Buddhist practitioners that talk about the dogs who have enriched their lives.

In her introduction, Simon writes about the loss of her dog Jas:

A mentor of mine said, "The human heart is the only organ that grows stronger through being broken." Jas's death broke my heart, and in the best kind of way. It broke my heart open to loving mightily and losing and then wanting to love again.

She says:

For some of us – for people like me – dogs carry a certain "medicine," a certain set of healing powers and properties that are unique to them and to their species. Loving and losing Jas and working in proximity to a menagerie of dogs each day, it became apparent to me that "dog medicine" has certain particular qualities that certain humans need and cherish.

One more selection from that book. Alice Walker, author of **The Color Purple**, writing about her dog Charlie observed:

There is a welcome, a joy, a delirium of delight, that dogs offer us that makes it impossible for us to believe we are not loved. And to know that love is a good thing to share whatever the form_ Charlie's entire body speaks the language of acceptance, engagement, and pleasure at my presence. It's true this is doubled if I am carrying food, but even without it, I am reminded that no matter what dreadful news is coming over the airwaves about the coldness and despair of our human situation, love is a constant in this world. No being

exhibits this quality more than Charlie, and all the other dogs without whose irrepressible teaching humans might forget.

She concludes:

It is taught that the Buddha had many lifetimes as various animals before he took human form. He was probably a dog just before becoming a Buddha.

For those who love dogs, and for those whose curiosity might have been triggered by this sermon, I highly recommend **The Dharma of Dogs**. I have already ordered two copies: one for the Vet who cared for Phoebe and saved Hannah's life..

For those whose lives have not yet been touched by dogs, there is still time. I am convinced dogs are a very significant part of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, and one place where we can touch that web is by sharing our lives with members of the species *Canis familiaris*.

PS: The Chinese New Year has brought us into The Year of the Dog!