"A Place in the Choir"

Intergenerational Blessing of the Animals – St. Francis Day
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Silent meditation amid a Blessing of the Animals is what we might call high risk. Yet, our cats and dogs and gerbils and other creatures can surprise us as they tune in to a meditative state and become almost reverent. "All God's critters got a place in the choir." In a few moments we'll join in these lyrics by Bill Staines, and we'll likely hear a few of those critters singing, howling, meowing, shuffling, and finding their "place in the choir" that is this morning's congregation. A moment before, it was a choir of silence. Then a yelp, a meow, a resonant growl even.

I wonder if the choir assembled centuries ago by St. Francis on that hillside village of Grecchio sensed the mystery and magic of what they were called to observe, what they were invited to participate in as descendants of the creatures who legend tells us surrounded the manger of the baby Jesus. I wonder if this morning's animal friends sense that they too are called to participate as honored guests in this service of worship. Blessings are given and received. Each and every creature here, human and otherwise, is a blessing. Today we honor our animal companions and how they have been blessings in our lives. So too we bless them with a gentle touch and wishes for a long and happy and healthy life with you, their human family.

If you travel a few hundred miles north to the Vermont village of St. Johnsbury, you will likely see signs to Dog Mountain. It's a sanctuary and a park devoted to dogs and created by the late Stephen Huneck. A few years ago my husband Dan and I, along with our beloved dog, Google, went there with our daughter and son-in-law and their beloved dog, Ella, for the Annual Fall Dog Party. Honest! Google and Ella frolicked on the 150-acre expanse dotted with dog-friendly ponds attracting spontaneous canine swims, dog-friendly climbing and balancing sculptures, and refreshment stops equipped with the edible treats that no dog in his right mind could refuse. But let's back up to the entrance of Dog Mountain. As you drive in, you'll see a big colorful sign: "Welcome all creeds. All breeds. No dogmas allowed."

If you're a dog lover, you might consider a trip there as a kind of pilgrimage, with the end point as the Dog Chapel, with honest-to-goodness stained glass windows featuring not St. Francis, but St. Sally—though this black lab so loved by Stephen Huneck wasn't really canonized by him. She simply saved his life many years ago, and he devoted his life to honoring her through his gifts as wood carver, painter, story-teller, and architect of Dog Mountain PLUS the scenery at the Annual Advent Blessing of the Animals at New York City's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. As you enter the chapel, you'll notice the pews whose endpoints are finely carved profiles of golden retrievers. You'll view an altar with a bas-relief of happy dogs. You'll note the stained glass windows. And especially, you'll stop short at the thousands of messages written and posted in memory of dogs much loved.

There's no reason why a parallel place for cats shouldn't exist. Maybe it does. In fact, this morning, this is a dog and cat and more chapel in this sanctuary.   This morning, we could well have placed out front a sign next to the Pumpkin Patch sign reading: "Welcome. All creeds. All breeds. No dogmas allowed."

While we do count some lifelong Unitarian Universalists in our midst, many of us are crossovers from other faith traditions that partly or didn't quite work for us, or no faith tradition at all. Here we are, like religious mutts, finding our place in a choir.   "All creeds. All breeds. No dogmas allowed!"

I'm guessing that St. Francis wasn't too picky in gathering the animals for that first crèche 800 years ago.   No auditions necessary, just come and join in a drama ages old even then, sing out, and feel the mystery and the magic of an ancient birth.   In the words of St. Francis that we sang earlier:

"All creatures of the earth and sky, come, kindred lift your voices high…"

Surely that loving monk wasn't just referring to human voices, but to the delicious cacophony that we're enjoying this morning, an inter-species chorus.

So too the 13th century Sufi mystic Rumi gathered his veritable choir: "Come, come, whoever you are."

Let's move into our own time.   A recent news item tells the story of Eclipse—not the lunar eclipse that happened last Sunday, but Eclipse the lab/pit bull mix who is completely secure about his place not in a choir, but on a city bus.

Eclipse lives with his human friend, Jeff Young, in Seattle.   They make regular trips by bus from their apartment to a dog park a few stops away. One day, Jeff took longer than Eclipse thought he could handle, so this confident canine boarded the bus by himself, found a seat, looked out the window, and after a few stops, trotted to the door and let himself out, heading straight for the dog park.   Jeff wasn't far behind.   This happened again and again.   The bus driver was welcoming, and the regular passengers got used to seeing Eclipse, vied for seats next to her, and reveled every time she got on board, checked the route, and got off at exactly the right stop.

A place in the choir, a place on the bus, a place in our homes, a place in this congregation, a place in our hearts.   Come, come, whoever you are.   We are blessed by your presence, and we bless you this morning. Isn't this Universalism at its most delightful?

Amen.

Sources:

Dog Mountain, www.dogmt.com

Jen Hayden, "Seattle dog masters public transit, rides bus alone to the dog park," posted in the *Daily Kos,* October 3, 2015, drawn from Hayden's post of January 13, 2015, http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/01/13/1357476/-Seattle-dog-masters-public-transit-rides-bus-alone-to-the-dog-park?detail=emailclassic

Bill Staines, *A Place in the Choir,* from *"Celtic Thunder – Heritage" –* 1988 Mineral River Music.