

Our Sisters and Brothers

The fact that I am standing here this morning is the result of two unusual circumstances. I was scheduled to speak April 15 but Mother Nature had other ideas and proceeded to deliver 20 plus inches of snow. No UU that Sunday. The second unusual circumstance is the result of a kind and generous offer by Cynthia Johnson. Cynthia was scheduled to speak today but she graciously stepped aside so that I might speak. Thank you, Cynthia. Now, just one more comment. If there is any truth to the saying that “No good turn goes unpunished,” if this talk of mine turns out to be a stinker, I’m afraid, Cynthia, that you may receive some of the blame. So...I guess we both have to hope that does not become a problem. In any case, let’s turn now to “Our Sisters and Brothers.”

Many of us, maybe most of us, share some similar views of other creatures:

Chipmunks are cute.

Eagles are majestic.

Snakes and spiders are at least yucky if not downright dangerous.

And that’s not all we share regarding other creatures.

Most of us have little, if any, meaningful contact with other creatures.

Most of us know little, if anything, about the lives of other creatures.

Most of us view other creatures as part of “another world” - a world of little or no relevance to “our world” except when they bother or inconvenience us in some way or when we choose to bother them by hunting, trapping, poisoning or otherwise killing them. To summarize these comments in one pithy statement we might echo E. O. Wilson, “...We’ve just simply removed ourselves from nature.”

A well-known student of animal behavior, Frans de Waal, recently wrote a book entitled, “Are we smart enough to know how smart animals are.” He questions whether we even know how to measure the intelligence of other creatures. In many cases I don’t believe we do.

In my very first UU talk given October 30, 2011 I reminded us that hundreds if not thousands of “our” genes are found in the DNA of insects, mice, plants, and even bacteria. Thanks to Paul Burton, we also know that chickens have about 19,000 genes and we humans, being of course much more highly developed, have more than 20,000 genes. But...we have discovered that grapes, yes grapes, have more than 30,000 genes. So we humans lie somewhere between a chicken and a grape. How does that feel?

Thus, the inescapable conclusion is that we are genetically related to all other forms of life - animals as well as plants. This morning I will share some true stories about how other creatures are capable of demonstrating some very surprising, and frequently very human-like behaviors. I will leave it to each of you to reflect on how to interpret these behaviors and then to extend that understanding to consider how we should treat other creatures.

One of the most stunning and heart-wrenching stories I have ever read was published in the New Orleans Times Picayune newspaper of January 24, 1958. It’s dateline was Bluff City, Tennessee. When you recover from the shock of this very brief story please permit me to share the next story. Then, and only then, will we will have a common basis for future thought and discussion.

Here’s the story. “Two sisters and their brother were walking home from school. It was their custom to walk down the railroad track. On this day they were on a trestle that spanned a stream when they heard the whistle of an approaching train. This was not unusual. It had happened before. They hurried to get to the end of the trestle. But in her hurry, the younger sister got her foot caught in the track. She tried to free it and couldn’t. By this time the train was coming nearer. She began to cry. Her older sister, who had almost reached the end of the trestle, came back and tried

frantically to free the girl, but she couldn't. So, she ran for safety. But the younger sister began to call again. According to the brother, the older sister went back the second time, this time more slowly. She put her arms around her little sister and together they faced the train that couldn't stop."

What can one say about this? I truly don't know except perhaps to suggest that love, true love, is costly. It is not possible to love without paying a price. But what a price the older sister paid! I can barely comprehend it.

Here, then, is the next story. It was on impulse, one summer, that Robert Leslie agreed to help a colony of pikas harvest their year's supply of wild grain and grasses. Now, let's stop right there. How many of us know what a pika is? Pikas are wonderfully beguiling little creatures related to rabbits but much smaller and with short little ears. A picture of one is on today's bulletin. They live, typically, above tree line and work tirelessly all through their short summer to harvest, dry, and store the carefully selected vegetation they will stash in underground burrows to eat throughout the long, cold winters at their high altitude homesites. They do not hibernate. They remain active and must eat all winter long. I have watched these beguiling little creatures countless times during our many Colorado family vacations.

That's who pikas are. Now, who was Robert Leslie? Leslie was half-Indian, half-Caucasian, an expert woodsman and white water canoeist, a superb writer, and a schoolteacher on summer vacation. Quite by accident when visiting the supposed grave of Sacajawea he met and was recruited for the task of helping the pikas by an elderly Indian shaman, Eagle Rock, who had helped the pikas in other years but could not help that summer for personal reasons. But he believed the colony was unusually vulnerable for a number of reasons and would not survive without human help.

Since circumstances precluded the old shaman from helping the pikas himself that summer Leslie agreed, after undergoing an intense few days of interrogation by the shaman, to help the pikas harvest their year's supply of wild grain and grasses. One day he noticed them acting very strangely. They were shelling and eating newly ripened seeds and pods of locoweed, a poisonous herb notorious throughout the West for its destructive effects on livestock. What was going on? Pikas are excellent botanists and are very selective with the vegetation they harvest and consume. They typically never harvest locoweed but that day they were. "One pika couple, Crusty and Spot, began to stagger. Leslie picked up Crusty and noticed for the first time a large fibroid tumor between his hind legs. Every step must have caused stabbing pain. " Here's what Leslie wrote about what happened next.

"An hour before sunset Crusty slowly floundered to the crest of the huge boulder above his and Spot's bunker...Like a meteorite from outer space, a great gray owl arced across the scree (a slope covered with small loose stones) and circled for the stoop. Crusty, in narcotic hypnosis, just sprawled there, ignoring high-pitched fives of general alarm." Leslie added, "I must have thrown a dozen rocks: but the owl swooped, side-slipped, and stooped unscathed, taloned the pika, and swished silently to the forest on the canyon parapet behind my campsite..."

Leslie continues. "A mood of suspense swiftly vibrated across the (pika) village. Tragically, Spot, Crusty's mate, had emerged from her den at the last moment and had witnessed the kill. She called with all her strength, but must have known her mate would never return... I am convinced that she - and the others - knew that Crusty gave up his life because of that hideous tumor. She continued to shrill from the rock...within ten minutes the same owl silenced her pitiful cries, and thus she joined her mate in their predator's metabolism. Crusty's and Spot's refusal to take cover established beyond any doubt deliberate self-destruction in the face of painful old age."

This story raises some fascinating questions. “How did those Pikas know that August 8 would be the day of the owl? Did Spot and Crusty’s behavior reflect a deliberate release from suffering in old age? Was life thought unbearable with the loss of a spouse? Did this behavior suggest uncanny understanding of the immediate future?” These creatures are lesser animals? I might add, parenthetically, that these high altitude-living creatures are very heat intolerant and are seriously endangered by our warming climate. Now we have two examples of deliberate self-destruction - one by a human and one by pair of pikas.

“It’s somewhat easier for us humans to imagine that highly social, mentally well-endowed apes and elephants, wolves and dolphins have individual personalities.” Of course, many of us have also experienced dogs, cats, and horses with widely different personalities. Scientists have discovered that just about anywhere you carefully look it becomes very obvious that individuals differ. Carl Safina confirms that it’s a fact of life. And it runs deep. Very deep.

Now that I’ve laid some groundwork with two remarkable stories I will relate a few brief anecdotes about some other creatures with whom we share our planetary home. I will not judge or attempt to explain. That is for you to consider and to draw your own conclusions.

What do you make of this event? Calamity was an abandoned coyote pup the author had taken in when she lived in Colorado. As the author put it, Calamity “wouldn’t bond, not even when I tried to lure her into bed by putting chicken bones under the blankets.” The author continues: “With Calamity nothing worked. That’s why I called her Calamity Coyote. It was like a very long, bad date. When she was finally old enough to be released, I took her to a clearing at the edge of the forest and she took off like a shot toward the trees.”

“But, just before disappearing she pulled up, turned, and looked back at me. It was more eye contact than we’d had in a long time. Then the most peculiar thing happened: after a moment, she ran back and jumped into my arms for a huge hug, something she hadn’t wanted in all the months she was with me. We hugged for maybe 15 seconds and then I put her down and she took off for good.”

I will add one comment to this anecdote. The old medicine man who agreed to permit Robert Leslie to spend a summer with “his” pikas had sent Leslie off with this admonition, “But remember above all else the ultimate doctrine that all wildlings must remain wild animals.”

Here’s some more food for thought.

1) “A wild raven in Nova Scotia sat on a fence calling for an hour until a person came and pulled several porcupine quills from its face and neck.”

2) “A dolphin off Hawaii with a fishhook in a flipper actively sought help from some scuba divers. One might logically ask how does a dolphin with a fishhook in a flipper decide to seek help from a human diver, a creature so alien to its own watery world?”

3) And again. “After (a group of) killer whales (teamed up to) wash a Weddell seal off an ice flow, whale experts Bob Pitman and John Durban watched as the seal dashed toward two nearby humpback whales. Just as the seal got to the closest humpback, the huge animal rolled over on its back - and the 400 pound seal was swept up onto the humpback’s chest between its massive flippers. Then, as the killer whales moved in closer, the humpback arched its chest, lifting the seal out of the water. When the seal start sliding back into the sea, the humpback gave the seal a gentle nudge with its flipper, back to the middle of its chest. Shortly after the killer whales had departed the seal scrambled off, swimming to safety on a nearby ice floe.” How do we explain those behaviors? How smart are these creatures? What do they understand about us? What do they understand about other creatures? We don’t know.

“At Gombe National Park in Tanzania, a researcher watched two adult male chimpanzees separately climb to the top of a ridge at sunset. There they noticed and greeted each other, clasped hands, sat down together, and watched the sun descend. Another researcher wrote of a free-living chimpanzee gazing for fifteen minutes at an especially striking sunset.” Could it be that they were admiring the sunset, probably for no deeper reason than that it looked pretty to them? “Same as us” in other words.

When we turn to whales, dolphins, and elephants the literature contains hundreds of strange, wonderful, behaviors. Let’s take a brief look at elephants first. “...Soon after the ‘elephant whisperer’ Lawrence Anthony passed away, nearly two dozen elephants - all of whom he had rescued and given asylum on his enormous reserve - converged on his home in two groups on two consecutive days, and lingered for two days. They had...not been there for a year. We understand that elephants can grieve. But grieve for a human? And how might elephants a twelve-hour walk away get a message that a certain man’s heart has stopped?” No one knows.”

And speaking about other animals being aware of a particular human, what would you say about this example? “During several decades of research on free-living dolphins in the Bahamas, Denise Herzing became familiar with particular individuals. Apparently, the feeling was mutual. After being gone for eight months each year, the researchers would return and all would reunite. The dolphins would surround the boat leaping and playing. ‘Joyous’ is probably the word I would use to describe it, wrote Herzing.” Now, that’s remarkable by itself.

On a more somber note, “at the beginning of one research trip, as Herzing’s vessel approached the familiar dolphins she’d been studying, they ‘greeted us but they acted very unusual,’ not coming within fifty feet of the boat. They refused invitations to bow-ride, also odd...At that point, someone discovered that one of the people aboard had just died during a nap in his bunk. Spooky enough. But then, as the boat turned to head back to port, the dolphins came to the side of our boat, not riding the bow wave as usual, but instead flanking us fifty feet away in an aquatic escort...They paralleled us in an organized fashion. After the crew had attended to the sad business at hand, when the boat returned to the dolphin area, the dolphins greeted us normally, rode the bow wave and frolicked like they normally did. After twenty-five years with those dolphins, Herzing never again saw them behave the way they did when the boat had a dead man aboard.”

At least two questions come to mind. First, how did the dolphins know a man had died? If they didn’t know how does one explain their behavior? Second, what does it mean for dolphins to become solemn in response to a human death? I can’t begin to explain it. I have no idea.

One well-known author has said this - “... the whales leave us with questions so puzzling they are disturbing.” Why disturbing? I would guess because so much of their behavior is so similar to human behavior. Some populations of free-living killer whales are ferocious predators of penguins, dolphins, and one-thousand pound sea-lions. Yet, as one author put it, “they have overturned no kayak, emptied no rowboat, and devoured no humans.” They “can be astonishingly playful and gentle. One killer whale delighted in playing with boats and people. He/she had no problem pushing forty-foot logs or turning a thirty-foot sailboat in a circle. But when he went to play with a canoe paddled by two women, or a kayak (with a single woman) he’d nudge very gently. Could the killer whale have had any idea that the water, his home medium, would kill a person?” If that weren’t amazing enough, unbelievably, there are records of whales rescuing both dogs and humans adrift in the ocean!

My last story also baffles me. “Argentina is one of the places where killer whales sometimes burst through the surf to drag sea lions right off the beaches.” Imagine, a 3-4 ton mass of muscle hurling

itself onto a beach, grabbing a 400 pound seal and thrashing its way back into the water. And mother whales teach this technique to their young! Mary and I have been to this beach but we didn't witness this behavior. Now wait, the story gets better. "You see a video of this and you think it would be insanity to stroll near the shoreline. Yet when park ranger Roberto Bubas stepped into the water and played his harmonica, the same individual killer whales would form a ring around him like puppies. They'd rally playfully around his kayak and come" - if you can believe this - "as he called to them by the names he had given them!" I am dumbfounded.

What can one say? There is so much our human minds do not understand. We know so little about the world that other creatures see and understand. Let's listen to a few thoughtful people who have commented on these matters.

Desmond Tutu: "The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation."

I spoke here last October on the Bible. There is not only "The Green Bible" but there is also "The Green Bible Devotional." Here is a quote in that devotional from Thomas a Kempis. "If thy heart were right, then every creature would be a mirror of life and a book of holy doctrine. There is no creature so small and abject, but it reflects the goodness of God."

Our Native American Sioux have this proverb: "With all things and in all things, we are relatives."

Lastly, here is Gary Besaw, former chair of the Menominee Indian tribe of Wisconsin. "The two-legged, the four-legged, the finned, the winged, and the plants, we're all related. How dare us say we're not."

I wrote most of this talk some time ago. Since then I have written several endings - all unsatisfactory. Last fall I finally decided how I wanted to conclude these remarks. Curiously, my decision was prompted by a question posed to me by a visitor the last time I spoke here, last October. The visitor was the mother of our teen-age accompanist that Sunday, the same young man who played for us last week. My topic that morning was "What do you believe the Bible is?" In that talk I repeated the statement from Micah that I have treasured for decades: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." The mother's question to me was, "How do you walk humbly with your God?" What follows is a slightly expanded version of my response to her. It is also my conclusion this morning.

You walk humbly with your God by waking up every morning:

- 1) Realizing you had absolutely nothing to do with your appearance in this world.
- 2) Realizing you live on a planet that is rich beyond your understanding.
- 3) Realizing you share a planet with a myriad of creatures, both seen and unseen, whose lives provide an inexhaustible source of learning, enchantment, and enrichment to anyone interested enough to pay attention.
- 4) Realizing we are only one strand in the vast and interdependent web of life. We are also stewards of something that does not belong to us.
- 5) Realizing that if we care, we may come to understand that other creatures are gifted with senses and abilities "we have lost or never attained." They live "by voices we shall never hear."

That's essentially how I responded to the mother. Now I will close with just two additional comments. "In so far as we neglect to place a high priority on the health and welfare of our fellow creatures on this planet, we ultimately threaten ourselves as gravely as we threaten other species." We ARE related to all other animals, plants, and bacteria. When will we begin to appreciate and marvel, perhaps even to partially understand, our relatives?