Animal Blessing Sunday:
The Spiritual Life of Animals
UU Fellowship of Santa Cruz County
November 16, 2025

Selected worship texts

Chalice Lighting

Welcome to our Animal Blessing-slash-Newcomer Welcome Sunday!

Whether you have come here seeking comfort,
encouragement, or inspiration,
whether you have two feet or four feet or no feet,
whether you have feathers or fur or scales,
you belong here.
You are welcome here.
You are seen here.
And today, we light our chalice
in gratitude for your life,
and for the spirit of Life itself that holds us all.

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New Member Ceremony

Will the new members who have been through orientation and agreed to join come please come forward and face the congregation.

Rev. Laura: Today, we welcome into our community these newest members, who have chosen to make a commitment to this congregation by signing our Membership Book.

We are so glad to have you here with us, and that you've chosen this community of fellow seekers to travel with you on your life journey.

Joining a religious community is a declaration of commitment—by both the congregation and by the individual member. In making these commitments, you have expectations of the congregation, and the congregation has expectations of you.

So now I ask you:

Will you accept our gifts of fellowship, discovery, and service?
Will you offer us your unique presence and gifts?
Will you add your name to the long history of Unitarian Universalists who spread hope with our living faith?
Will you engage with us as we seek to create a community and a world dedicated to love and justice?

If you agree, please respond, "I will."

New Members: I will.

Rev. Laura: And now, I ask the congregation,
Will you welcome these new members with the warmth and comfort of your fellowship?
Will you seek to add your strengths and talents to the new gifts they bring to us?
Will you share our triumphs and our struggles as our community grows and changes?

If you all agree, please respond, "We Will."

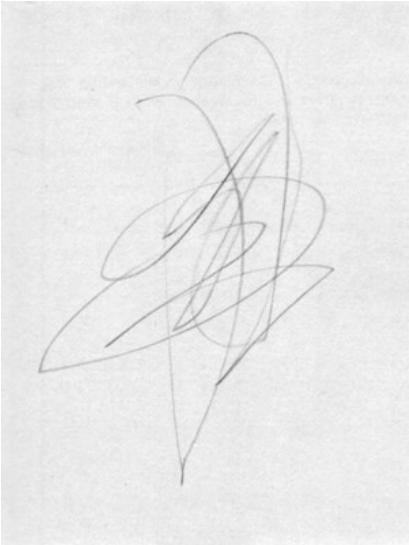
Congregation: We will.

Rev. Laura: Since we have now entered into covenant and shared our expectations with each other, our new members will now sign the Membership Book. As you sign the book, our Membership Team member will give you a gift.

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Sermon The Spiritual Life of Animals (Rev. Laura)

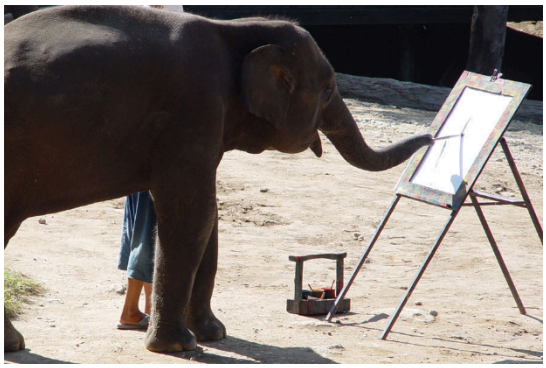
Today, I'd like to start with a drawing.



Take a look at the drawing on the screen here.
What do you think—do you like it?
There's a story behind it. In 1982,
an art professor from Syracuse University named Jerome Witkin
was invited to take a look at a portfolio of drawings
by a local "mystery artist."
He said, sure, why not?
The drawing you see here was one of the ones he was shown.

Here's what he had to say, and I quote:
"These drawings are very lyrical, very, very beautiful.
They are so positive and affirmative and tense,
the energy is so compact and controlled, it's just incredible….
I can't get most of my students to fill a page like this."

Guess who the artist was?
Any ideas? Anyone want to guess?
The artist who so impressed this art professor
was an elephant, a fourteen-year-old Asian elephant named Siri
who lived in a zoo in Syracuse.[1]



This is a baby elephant who's just learning.
In the wild elephants draw in the dirt, with sticks.
But they like painting with human-made paints and paintbrushes too.
As far as we can tell, elephants like to draw and paint
for just the same reasons people do.
It's creative. It's a way to express yourself.
To me, that is part of spirituality—finding ways to express yourself
and create something beautiful.
And why shouldn't other creatures?
They have eyes and ears and skin and taste and smell—
they are open to the beauty and amazingness of the world
just as we are.

By the way, elephants aren't the only animals who draw.

Chimpanzees really love drawing,
and they each have their own style, just like people.
In fact, back in the 1950s, there was a chimp named Ally

[1] Gary Kowalski, *The Souls of Animals* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), pp. 68–69.

who liked to do very high-energy spatter-painting.
One of the humans who worked with her
took one of her pieces to an art appraiser
and told the guy, "This was done by a talented friend."
He took one look and said,
"Jackson Pollack!"[2]

Other animals make music, just as we do.
Lots of birds make up different songs.
They're creative, just like human composers.[3]



Humpback whales compose their songs too.
If you listen to whale song, you find out
different groups of whales sing different songs.
Each group sings the same song, but each group is different.
And the really cool thing is, the songs change over time.
Little by little, the whales change what they're singing—
they create new songs as a group.[4]
To me that says whales are musical artists too.

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Now let's talk about love for a bit.
Because, from the outside looking in,

[2] Kowalski, pp. 69–71.
[3] Kowalski, pp 58–60.
[4] Katy Payne, in "Whale Songs and Elephant Loves," *Speaking of Faith* radio program, January 21, 2010.

it sure looks like some of our animal cousins feel love just as we do.



This is a pair of jackdaws.
Jackdaws are birds who mate for life,
and they live a very long time for birds, up to 15 or 20 years even.
And just like some people, they seem to fall in love at first sight.
I want to read you what the zoologist Konrad Lorenz says about them,
because it is so sweet:

> …[H]ardly ever separated by more than a yard,
> the two make their way through life.
> They seem tremendously proud of each other,
> as they pace ponderously side by side….
> Every delicacy that the male finds is given to his bride
> and she accepts it with the plaintive begging gestures and notes
> otherwise typical of baby birds.
> In fact, the love-whispers of the couple
> consist chiefly of infantile sounds,
> reserved by adult jackdaws for these occasions.
> Again, how strangely human!
> …[And] even after many years,
> the male still feeds his wife with the same solicitous care,
> and finds for her the same low tones of love,

tremulous with inward emotion,
that he whispered in his first spring of betrothal and of life.[5]

And that sounds like love to me.

The last thing I want to talk about
is what it means to care for others, to protect each other from harm.
This is another story about birds.



The birds you see here are called roseate *[ROW-zee-uht]* terns,
and they're endangered but bouncing back these days.

Many years ago a biologist was collecting specimens of bird life,
back in the days when "collecting specimens" meant killing them
and shipping them home.
This biologist shot and wounded a tern, and it fell into the sea.
The other terns hovered close by.
The wounded bird started to drift toward the shore.
But before the man could reach the bird,
two of the other terns flew down to the wounded bird.
They each grabbed hold of one of its wings
and lifted him up and flew out to sea about six or seven yards.
The weight of the bird was very heavy,

[5] Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring* (New York: Crowell, 1952), pp. 158–159, quoted in Kowalski, pp. 96–98.

and that's as far as they could manage.
But then two more terns swooped down and carried their companion
a little farther, and then two more carried him a little farther,
and so on, until they reached a rock out in the sea
where they could land, and they set the wounded bird down there.
The biologist really wanted his specimen, and he waded in after it.
Then the whole flock of terns swooped down on him,
blocking his path, while two more terns carried their wounded friend
even farther out to sea.
And with that, at last he allowed his heart to be touched.
He let them escape.
And he realized, it would be a better world if human beings
could always be as kind and brave as those birds had been.

So I don't think we are so different from other animals.
We are all in this life together,
all facing the tremendous mysteries of life and death,
love and loss, each in our own way.
And if that's not spirituality, I don't know what is.

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Blessing the Animals (Rev. Laura)

Now it's time to bless the animals!
We begin with our animal friends on Zoom.
Zoom congregation members,
if you have an animal or animals near you,
would you please lay your hands gently on them?

Dear animals of our Zoom congregation, we bless you.
We honor you.
We thank you for being you.

Now, people in our sanctuary, we invite you to bring your animal companions up to the front for a special blessing.
Or if you've brought a photo of a pet you'd like to be blessed, you're also invited to come on up.
As they come forward, everyone else, just enjoy the parade!

(Animals come forward)

Now let's take a moment to bless all the animals of the world.
Sanctuary folks, let's speak out loud the names of the animals you want to bless today, and Zoom folks, please use the chat to type the names of the animals you want to bless.

To all the animals of the world, both named and unnamed,
and to all the beings of the earth, plants and people
and countless other forms of life:

We bless you.
We honor you.
We thank you for being you.

And let's close our blessing of the animals with a joyful song.

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Extinguishing the Chalice/Closing Blessing

Folks in the sanctuary, please remain standing as you're able.
In just a moment, I'll offer a closing blessing,
then we'll extinguish our chalice until we light our flame again,
and then Jordan will lead us in singing our Doxology.
After that, you're welcome to stay for hospitality!
I'll be around to chat, and I'm hoping to connect with folks on Zoom via a laptop we'll set up outside.

And now, we extinguish the chalice with this blessing:

May every creature be held
in the same love that moves the sun and the stars.
May every creature be free to run, to crawl, to fly, to slither,
to *exist* in its own nature.
And may our human hearts and hands help make it so.

Go in peace. Blessed be and amen.