

Kindred Spirits:

Animals as Spiritual Teachers



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Our desire is to make Unity literature available to everyone who wants it, especially those most in need of spiritual encouragement.



Introduction

In Georgia, a highlight of services at Atlanta Unity Church has been the presence of Reverend Duke, a longhaired miniature dachshund. He is lovingly referred to as the “Minister of Unconditional Love,” and the church community has numerous stories of how Rev. Duke has helped members of the congregation.



"Animals are closer to God than humans. They are closer to the source. The humans are more lost in the mind forms."—Eckhart Tolle

What the members of Atlanta Unity Church know and what Unity recognizes is this: Whether they have paws, wings, fins or hooves, all of God's creatures can teach us about love, gratitude and oneness. As Sharon Callahan writes in her article “The Forgotten Angels” on page 28:

“We attempt to better ourselves by attending workshops, seminars, intensives, vision quests, retreats, recovery groups and Om circles. I fully understand this longing for spiritual guidance, but perhaps we look too far afield, or possibly our sights are too lofty. Maybe we should try looking down for a change! ... Who is that little furred and bewhiskered friend at our feet?”

In our home or in the wild, they come to us just as they are—spiritual beings living fully in the moment, ready to teach those of us who are willing to learn.

Your Friends in Unity

For more inspirational stories about animals as spiritual teachers, visit www.unity.org/pets11.



Lessons From a Small, Loud Cat

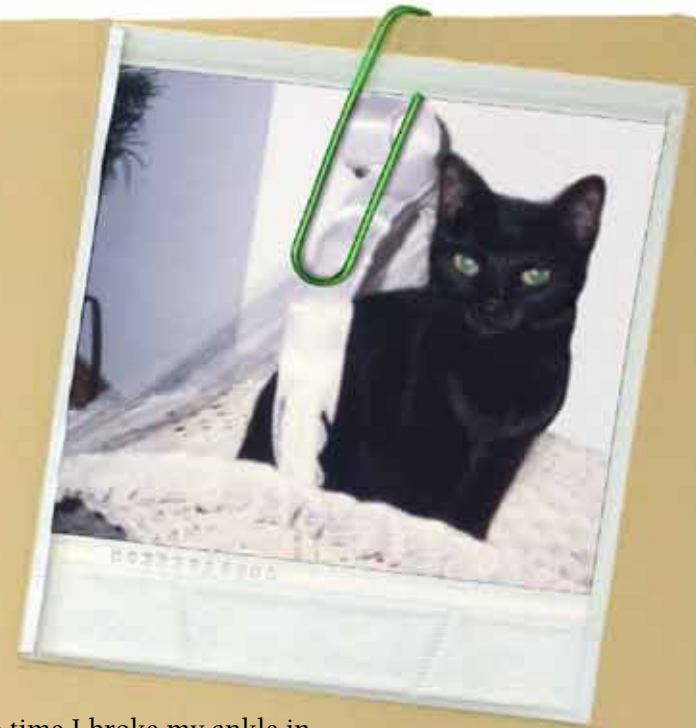
By Angie Olson

Loud. That is the best way I can describe my cat Charlotte. When I found her at the pound, she was the only kitten left. Eight others had been adopted that day. She was a tiny, six-week old black kitten who stood on her back legs and “screamed” at me through her cage. The woman working told me no one wanted her because she was a runt and she was loud. Hmmm, I thought, What’s wrong with that?

When I held the kitten, I knew she was coming home with me. I expected her to hide out for a while, but she didn’t. We bonded immediately and after I bathed her, she snuggled on my neck for three hours without moving. I was giddy with delight. She was home.

Over the years, Charlotte has shown me many lessons about life. One is, Don’t be afraid to ask for what you want, and don’t stop asking until you get it. Charlotte isn’t afraid to let me know what she needs—loudly and incessantly. While some people might find this annoying in a pet, with Charlotte I find it charming. I think it’s because she is so physically small, yet has enormous tenacity.

She has also shown me that it is important to show the people that you love how much they mean to you. I knew from that first day of snuggling that I “belonged” to Charlotte. She is my cat and I am her person. She chooses to sleep beside me each night.



One time I broke my ankle in five places. As I sat crying and cursing, waiting for my husband’s help, it was Charlotte who arrived first to sit with me. She didn’t run and hide from the chaos; rather she let me know she was there to support. I try to remember this when I want to run from chaos. It’s important to “be there” for those we love, even when it’s hard.

As loud as she was, Charlotte would always hide when anyone came over. She was noisy with those she loved and trusted—but scared and timid with strangers. This made me nervous when my first child, James, was on his way. How would she react—would

she hide out all the time? I didn't want my pal to be scared and retreat from me.

Charlotte wasn't crazy about the new baby. She would wait for the house to get quiet before she'd come out and relax. And once James started crawling, she did hide—a lot. As he grew, James would sometimes find Charlotte snuggling with me. He was shocked to see her out and about.

He decided at about age three that Charlotte was going to like him, but he didn't understand why she ran every time he entered the room. "Just sit calmly and she will learn it's okay," I would say.

To my amazement, he did begin sitting calmly when Charlotte was around. He'd walk peacefully into the room, and pet her very gently. It became a quest for James to make Charlotte like him. And he accomplished it. Over time, Charlotte came to love James and James grew to adore Charlotte.

They now lounge around together and are loud together. Charlotte taught James that animals deserve respect and that you have to earn their trust. She also taught him that persistence pays off. And Charlotte has built a bridge between my son and me. When I want to have a heart-to-heart with James, Charlotte is the connection. She gives us common ground—a place to start—usually by

snuggling in the middle between us. Somehow, it's easier for both of us to talk when she is there.

At 16, Charlotte is no longer timid and never runs to hide. It seems that while she found her voice as a kitten, she learned to trust herself and others in old age. I hope to do the same.

Editor's note: During the compilation of this booklet, Angie's beloved cat, Charlotte, passed away at the age of 16. We lovingly affirm that Charlotte has moved on to a peace-filled new realm, and that the memories of times shared together will soothe her family's ache from saying goodbye.



Listening to the Heart

By Terry Newell



MILES



We both needed to learn
to follow our hearts.

I found the dog in a small cage designed for a cat. Earlier that day a well-meaning friend had sent me a picture of the animal with a link to the shelter's website. I told myself I would come and look, just to ease my conscience. That the only thing I was going to do: doggy window-shop. But the photo I had been emailed didn't prepare me for his eyes: wide, luminescent brown and a little bit terrified.

The tag on the cage indicated that the dog was a stray, describing him as a tri-color terrier. He was a little bundle, curled up in the corner on a washcloth-sized towel. Unlocking his cage, the attendant pulled the lanky, squirming puppy out, and I followed her through the facility to an outside area. She set the animal down and left.

The dog immediately ran to the fence where he relieved himself. My heart sank when I thought of how he must have been in agony, not wanting to soil his cage. He slowly walked over to me, lying down and resting his head on my shoe. My heart once again wrestled with logic. The city had been holding him in this facility for almost a month and the website had indicated he was on a list of animals to be euthanized within the week.

Some guys, like me, go through life guided by the power of their minds, not their hearts. I pride myself on figuring out ways to logically get through life, ignoring the emotion radiating from the center of my being. And until that day at the animal shelter, I thought I had succeeded. Petting the dog, whose coat

felt more like fiber than fluff, my heart won the battle.

The attendant returned, and I was given instructions on where to pick him up after he was neutered.



Miles lying next to his brother Max.

Over the next few days I began to realize that Miles approached life just like I did, with logic and caution. To protect himself, he avoided any form of comfort a soft dog bed could provide in exchange for the camouflage available from a pile of leaves. Watching him burrow under the leaves one afternoon, I

suddenly understood why God had put us together. We both needed to learn how to follow our hearts, to trust the unknown, to release logic and follow the Spirit within.

“I get it now, God,” I murmured to myself, and smiled. Miles, hearing my voice, popped his head out of the leaves, just as his schnauzer brother Max took a flying leap and jumped into the pile on top of

him. Listening to them play was music for my soul, and in that moment, I began listening to life’s rhythm with my heart instead of my head.

And the music was oh, so beautiful.

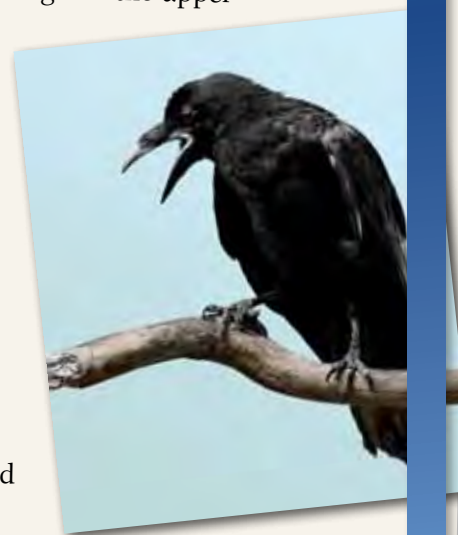



Crowheart

By Susan Chernak McElroy


The first time I met DaVinci, WildCare’s crow ambassador, I was intimidated. I didn’t know that at the time, but I’ve come to realize that the unsettled feeling in my belly and the self-conscious hunching of my neck and shoulders are my personal markers for that uneasy emotion. WildCare, our local wildlife rehabilitation center, is where I spend my Wednesday mornings, cleaning cages, feeding wild orphan babies, and fraternizing with the best bunch of wildlife fanatics it’s ever been my joy to know.

DaVinci lives in a huge flight cage on the upper level of the center. He was found as a youngster on university campus grounds, which was a fitting place for him to fledge because he is an eccentric professor at heart, brilliant and quirky. Crows are in that rarified community of the smartest of all birds, sometimes being compared intellectually to a five-year-old. I’m here to tell you that he is far brighter, and more calculating, than that.





DaVinci remained at WildCare because of a bum foot and wing that never repaired.



“We need someone for the DaVinci Team on Wednesday mornings,” said Jennifer the shelter manager. “Would you like to do it?”

DaVinci, Prince of Darkness

DaVinci has his own team of caregivers. A bird of such

brainpower and complexity requires a lot of attention and interaction, and a group of us are assigned to be his slaves. Some of us are his trainers. All of us are his trainees. I agreed to join the group, and was given a morning of training that included details on how to clean his cage, prepare his daily banquet, play games with him, and avoid getting attacked, should I be one of those to whom DaVinci does not take an immediate liking—which, of course, I was.

I am a woman who can—with confidence and calm—wash a hawk, medicate a possum, fend off biting squirrels, and wrestle with injured raccoons, but I discovered that I could not enter DaVinci’s palace without being instantly overcome by a feeling of total, clumsy dorkiness.

DaVinci has this look, you see. It is one of utter scrutiny, arrogance and mischief. You can see that brain of his clicking away like a slot machine on

steroids. The first few weeks I worked in his cage, he would welcome me with a jaunty, “Goodbye! Goodbye! Goodbye!!” holding out his black wings like Dracula’s cape, and bobbing his shiny head up and down.

That would be the best of our interactions. Our other social contact consisted of him dive-bombing my head, chasing me around his enclosure pecking at my ankles, and—if he could grab onto them—hanging off the skin of my wrists while flapping like a lunatic. Did I mention that his beak has the force of a jackhammer and can hold on like a pair of vise grips?

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

Outside of DaVinci’s cage is a logbook where team members chart daily notes about their interactions with him. After my Wednesday assaults, I would sit down at the logbook and read: “DaVinci was so playful today! He wanted lots of pets ...” or “Such a cuddly bird today. He loved playing with his cardboard box and rocks.” I would leave my own notes, such as “Tried to shred my socks today,” or “Didn’t draw as much blood as usual.”

Kindly team members would write back to me, assuring me that DaVinci was simply getting to know me, and that it could take a while. Some reminded me not to show any fear of him.

Actually, I had no fear of his attacks. I’ve been bitten by harder mouths than his. All I felt when I was in his enclosure was stupid. Just plain, awkward, stupid.

The Heavy Burden of Expectation

For a brief period of time, I asked myself why he disliked me so much. Soon, though, I asked myself the more relevant question, which was, “Why do I feel so self-conscious around this bird?” It is always the questions we ask about our own attitudes that hold the greater harvest.

I began observing myself around DaVinci, and realized how many expectations and attitudes I took into his cage with me. Here are a few of them, and believe me, there were many, many more:

“He WILL like me. Animals like me because I like them.”

“If I keep my willpower strong, I’ll wear him down, and THEN he’ll like me.”

“I want to pet him like the others do. I’ll just keep trying.”

“I’ll be my confident self today, and act as though I don’t feel like a dork.”

Outside DaVinci’s cage one morning with a peace-offering of Cheerios in my hand, I finally had my aha moment. I cringed with embarrassment. I was setting up a challenge between myself and an injured, captive crow. In my heart, my stand was an aggressive one, pushing myself and my desire onto this bird. Thinking back, I saw that I had often reached for an animal with my own agenda out in front, dominating the interaction.

Looking deeper, I realized that my need to be liked carried over big time to my interactions with animals. Behind my pushiness lurked a deep-seated insecurity I’d been reckoning with for decades. I just didn’t see how it played out in my feeling world until DaVinci.

In his palace, DaVinci sat silently, watching me with those penetrating black eyes. The phrase “Who do you think you are?” came to mind. It seemed that who I thought I was—or wanted to be—was the dominant energy I brought into all my relationships in one way or another.

I gave DaVinci his Cheerios, and went off to reflect on my insight for many weeks. It was an intimidating insight, but very fruitful, with many far-reaching effects on me.

Something to “Crow” About

Through the eyes of a crow, I became able to see myself in a new way. I’m still settling into this newfound wisdom about what drives my behavior, and how I play that out in the world. I’m realizing, in a much deeper, more subtle way, that it isn’t all about me.

One change I made was to enter DaVinci’s enclosure with a humble attitude. Really, I was simply there to serve, to tend, to companion a crow. He didn’t



need to like me. No being NEEDS to be bullied or manipulated into liking me. For a time, I became concerned that perhaps my presence in his cage was a source of stress to him, but I was told by the team to just carry on.



Over the months, DaVinci quit harassing me. Slowly, he revealed his acceptance of my presence by bathing while I was cleaning his cage or sitting by me when I set his food on the floor. A couple of times, he tolerated brief strokes of his lower wing and tail feathers before warning me off with a thrust and snap of his beak.

Over these months, I've brought my new awareness into my interactions with my chickens, my frogs, my dogs and my

husband. I am becoming more humble and peaceful inside by tiny increments, and learning more about myself every step of this new journey.

Last month, DaVinci came and perched near me while I was on the floor filling his bath basin. Without preamble, he bowed his head to me and opened his wings—his invitation to pet. Carefully, I moved my fingers gently up his shoulders and he closed his eyes and lowered his neck as I massaged deep into his

shoulder and cape feathers. For the next 20 minutes, we sat that way, him turning his head to get his beak stroked, his head rubbed, and his eyes tickled. Twice since then, he's solicited massages from me. This week, he's molting, and warned me to keep my hands to myself, which I have the good sense to do these days. No more pushy me. No more.

This article appeared on the blog “Animals as Teachers and Healers With Susan Chernak McElroy” and is used with the permission of the author.

Teacher, master storyteller and author of the classic *New York Times* best-seller, *Animals as Teachers and Healers: True Stories and Reflections*, Susan Chernak McElroy's writings are published in more than 20 languages worldwide. A long-term survivor of advanced cancer, she speaks from a rich body of lived experience, reminding us that our evolutionary journey toward becoming more fully human beings has included thousands of years of intimate connection with animals and the living Earth. For more information on Susan, visit <http://susanmcelroy.wordpress.com>.



We Said *Yes!*

By Cindy Entwistle

Our beloved cocker spaniel, Cassie, was part of our family for 15 years and saying goodbye to her was one of the hardest things we ever had to do. We were heartbroken and we vowed to never get another dog.

A year and a half later, my daughter brought her new puppy, Lexie, over for us to keep for the night while she got her apartment ready. We spent the afternoon watching this adorable puppy as she hopped around the living room, shaking her toys in her mouth. I had forgotten how much joy a puppy could bring. It was going to be hard to give her back the next day.

The next afternoon Michelle came to pick her up. Lexie was sleeping in my lap, exhausted from a full morning of play. I gave her one last kiss on the head and said goodbye. I felt my heart break as I handed the puppy to my daughter. Michelle could see the sadness in my eyes. "Mom, do you want to keep her? I live in an apartment and you have a big yard for her to run and play in. She'll probably be happier with you." I looked at my husband longingly. "It's up to you," he said. "I know how much you love dogs and have missed not having one."

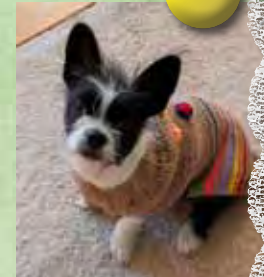
Ultimately, it was my decision and I thought and prayed about it. Research shows that pets can improve moods, reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and prolong life. But there were other things I had to consider. We had

enjoyed the freedom of being without a pet, not having to interrupt our day together to check on one. Plus there would be the added expense of shots, dog food and vet bills. It would be like having a baby in the house again. I held Lexie in my arms and my heart melted as she looked up at me with those big brown eyes. It was in that moment I knew. We said yes.

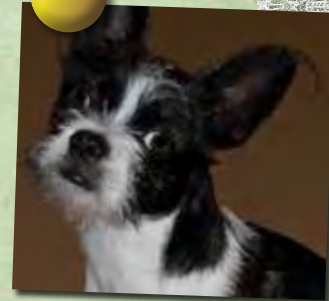
We have had Lexie for five months now and she constantly reminds us how to surrender to life—to enjoy life to its fullest. She embraces her reality completely; she doesn't wonder how her life could be different. Pets have an innate ability to enjoy life without questioning. Lexie never frets about yesterday or worries about tomorrow. She never holds a grudge. Lexie doesn't care about how much money we make or how we look. She loves everyone unconditionally.

No matter what mood we are in, Lexie is always there—eager to play, eager to please, eager to give and get love in return. She has taught us to fully enjoy what is in front of us. After all, all we have is this very moment.

We are so glad we said YES.



LEXIE



A Fish Not Even Gold

By James Dillet Freeman

In my garden I built two shallow lily ponds and put goldfish into them. They multiplied. But dogs tore the liner and ruined the ponds, so in the fall I drained them and gave away the fish.

Later that fall, much rain fell, and in the winter, much snow. Two or three inches of water formed in the bottom of the pools. It must have been frozen solid for at least a month and must have frozen solid and thawed a number of times. There may have been times when the pools were dry.

When spring came, I went out one Sunday afternoon to measure the pools, because I intended to rebuild them. I measured the larger pool, then went to the smaller one. It had no water in it. It had rained a week before, so how long it had been dry I do not know. There were a few spots of half-dry, oozy muck in the bottom.

On top of this muck, in the sun, on its side and not breathing, lay a goldfish about three inches long.

I still remember my surprise at seeing it, there in the middle of that empty pond, shining in the sun, a little red-gold fish. It has to be dead, I thought. But almost as I thought it, something in that fish said: “No, no, I am alive. Pick me up.”

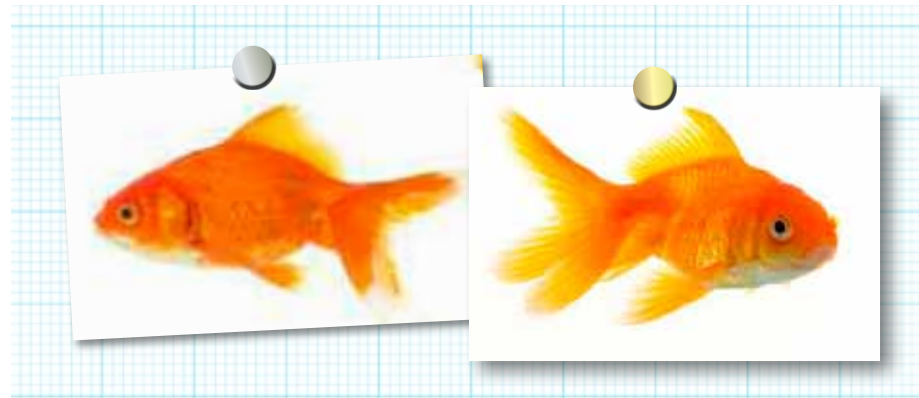
I ran to the house and got a glass of water. I picked up the fish—and it gasped! I put it in the glass, and for a long time it did not move again. I could see that one fin was gone and part of its side was damaged.

I moved the fish from the glass into a larger bowl. For several days, it showed almost no sign of life, but little by little its vitality came back, and in a week, that little fish was lashing with life. That fish was the most alive creature I ever saw. It spent every waking moment flashing, darting, hurtling around that bowl and trying to push through the glass.

When I put it back into the lily pond, it lived in the pond as if to know how dear life is and was not going to waste a moment of it.

How had it survived that winter of freezing and thawing and drying out? It is hard to surmise.

And what if I had not gone out to the pond on that March day? A few more minutes at most and it surely would have died.



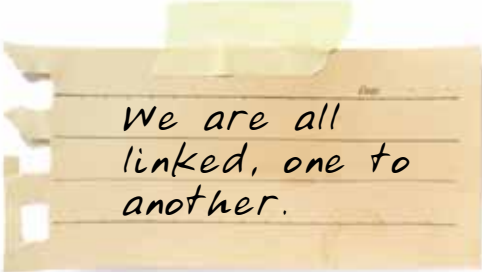
But it lived—lived to live furiously again!

You may not think so, but I will always believe I had to go out to that pond because it had to live.

I suppose you had to see my fish to understand. You had to pick it up. You had to see it lashing about that bowl. You had to see it whirling through that pond.

Somehow that fish had the livingness of life in it.

What a fuss to make about a fish, you may be saying, and a ridiculous coincidence!



I am only such a fish,
not even gold. And
my pond is also a
perilous, precarious
place; it, too, has
had many times of
freezing, of thawing,
and of drying out.

And like my fish, I,
too, am here, I feel,

because I have called, and the feet of the world have been no less swift when they ran to succor me.

We are all linked, one to another. We answer, though we have heard no voice. We respond, though we do not know we have been summoned.

And the universe responds to us—with powers you could not think were there, by ways you had no forethought of, bringing help you could not know would come.

For the Love of Buffie

By Lisa C. Earl

Her registered name was Buff-in-Stuff, but I called her Buffie. From the time I was seven, this cocker spaniel was my source for unconditional love for more than 13 years.

Our family went through many trials while I was growing up. My mom battled cancer for five years. It started out as breast cancer, then spread to her lung and then throughout her body taking her from us. I was 12 years old at the time. My father had no idea how to raise a preteen on his own and I was left alone much of the time. Buffie became my lifeline.

Two years after my mom died, Dad eloped with a neighbor from across the street. I not only gained a stepmom overnight but also three stepsisters.

The transition into a newly built home for the newly blended family was not an easy one. In the first month of the marriage, both of our previous homes sold within a week of each other. I was sent to live with a best friend for a short time and then in an unfurnished home with my 16-year-old stepsister. We were not able to stay with

my dad and stepmom as they were staying with her parents in a different school district.

At the unfurnished home, we slept on the floor in sleeping bags with our pillows. We had a cooler for a fridge, one lawn chair and a small black and white TV. We had no alarm clock as it just wasn't provided for us. I remember being so terrified of not waking up for school in time that I barely slept the entire time we were there. Sadly I was not able to have Buffie with me during the year when the house was being built. She lived with my grandparents, which was very hard for me. I had never felt so abandoned by my dad and family as I did during that year. When Buffie and I were reunited in the new home she greeted me enthusiastically and I felt complete again. What had been missing in my life was the joy that comes from being loved and loving.

Buffie was also there for me during the most horrifying night of my life. Cruising was very popular during my teenage years. Every Friday and Saturday night a good friend and I would hit the main drag.

We ended up meeting the same three guys two weekends in a row and went cruising with them. The last time we met up it was a group decision to hit one of the local parks to get out of the cramped car and stretch our legs. I was brutally raped that night by two of the guys. When I got home my dad and stepmom didn't believe me at first, but they did once we were at the hospital. Returning home, there was Buffie to greet me with love and without any judgment. She lay beside me throughout the night as I cried in anguish.

Before my 21st birthday, Buffie was diagnosed with stomach cancer. I've heard it said that animals don't live as long as humans because they already know how to love. And it was the love that Buffie brought into my life that allowed me to love her enough to let her go in peace.



Lisa before her high school prom. Buffie is by her side.

Big Gratitude

By Mary Earls

It was late June in a dry summer when the dog showed up at the house, looking for water. He found some in a half-full garden bucket under the front deck. He was the biggest dog I'd ever seen: coal black and almost waist high, with a massive chest and enormous head and jaws. I remember thinking my entire hand would fit in his mouth.

The spot under the deck was shady and protected, and the big dog lingered there. I'd see him in the morning as I left for work. In the evening, he'd amble over as I stopped my car in the driveway, putting his nose on the window. The first time it happened, I sat in the front seat, stiff with fear, waiting for the dog to get distracted long enough for me to open the car door, then dash up the front steps and into the house.

At some point I realized the big dog wasn't going to go after me. A softness in his eyes contradicted the message of his powerful body. So I grew bolder. "Get out of here!" I yelled one night. The dog's head lowered, his ears went back, and he slinked away into the brush across the road. But the next morning, he was back under the deck. And that evening he was waiting as I pulled into the driveway.

He's watching out for me, I thought. So I began watching out for him. I made sure the water bucket was

full. From time to time I grabbed handfuls of kibble from the bag I kept for my two Bichons and dropped the pellets under the deck. It was a stealth operation; my husband David didn't want another dog.

One Friday night, the deal was sealed. We grilled steaks, tossed salad, opened a bottle of wine and watched the big dog watch us. By now he was putting his nose on the bay window in front of the kitchen table. As I ate, I noticed the dog's ribs stuck out from his chest. His footpads were torn and bleeding. Flies swarmed around the open sores on his flanks.

I stood up from the table. "He's getting this," I said, and walked into the front yard with my half-eaten T-bone. The dog took the steak, tail wagging furiously, and devoured it with a few mighty crunches. Then he took my entire hand, put it in his mouth and held it there, ever so gently.





“That’s the biggest dog I’ve ever seen,” David said. “I wonder if we can get him in the car. There’s a vet about three miles from here.”

The clerk at the vet’s office asked us the dog’s name. “He really doesn’t have one,” I said. “We just call him big dog.” When we picked up his tag, it read “Big Dog Earls.”

That was nine years ago. With only a few exceptions, each day since then Big Dog has shared his joy with us. Unity people might say he has an attitude of gratitude. I’d say Big Dog simply *is* gratitude. His daily demonstration of thankfulness starts first thing in the morning, with the three best words in the language: “let’s feed you.” It doesn’t matter if the stuff in his bowl is Science Diet or the Wal-Mart special. It’s all dish-lickin’ good.

Big Dog watches over me, and I watch out for him. Especially now, as his muzzle grays and his gait slows. “You know he’s about 77 in dog years,” David said the other night. I think about the flights of stairs he has to climb in the house, his early morning stiffness and the time when he will lie down and not get up again.

A few days ago we went to the vet’s office for the inevitable conversation, preparing ourselves for the day we have to say goodbye. When the time comes, Big Dog’s transition will be pain-free in gratitude for the good life he has helped create for us.

“You’ll know when the time is right,” said Joyce, the vet’s assistant. “You’ll see it in his eyes.” We’re not there yet, but the day is coming as surely as winter follows autumn. When it does, there will be lots of petting, Unity’s *Prayer for Protection*, a moment in the Silence—then ashes falling gently in a shady, protected place.

As our visit went on, my husband wondered about the next dog. That’s when Joyce said, “You guys ought to take a look at the rescue puppy that just came in. He’s about 12 weeks old and already weighs 15 pounds—a real butterball.”

The puppy was coal black, with an enormous head and chest, large paws and soft eyes. He jumped up in David’s lap, his tail wagging. “He’s going home with us,” David said.

We named him Little Big Dog.

Prayer for Protection

The light of God surrounds us;
The love of God enfolds us;
The power of God protects us;
The presence of God watches over us.
Wherever we are, God is!





The Forgotten Angels

By Sharon Callahan



Being touched by animals on a deep soul level is a daily occurrence. I work at home in the company of my cat Lily. Lily has been my companion for eight years now, and I am still discovering her many wonderful attributes. ... She keeps me company all day, coming to check on me between her outings in the yard. When she feels that I have spent an unhealthy length of time writing at my computer, she sits right on top of it, leans over and licks my forehead to remind me that there is more to life than words could ever say.

Some time ago, during a yearlong illness, Lily was the only living soul who freely chose to stay with me. She kept a vigil near my bed and kissed away my tears with her warm pink tongue. Late into the night she purred sweet healing songs into my pillow. Often she had to wait for days for her favorite food, but her devotion never wavered. She would lie on my body where the discomfort was the most intense and pour so much loving energy into me that soon the pain was gone. I have known few human beings of such devotion. ...

Sometimes just looking in an animal's eyes I have been transported beyond space and time to a place as close to God as I can get and still be in a body. I feel at peace around animals—safe, warm, companioned, honored, seen and close to heaven. ...

It is popular these days to be searching for angels, spirit guides, gurus, teachers and therapists. When not searching for these, we attempt to better ourselves

by attending workshops, seminars, intensives, vision quests, retreats, recovery groups and Om circles. I fully understand this longing for spiritual guidance, but perhaps we look too far afield, or possibly our sights are too lofty. Maybe we should try looking down for a change!

Who is that little furred and bewhiskered friend at our feet? The one who runs to greet us with an open heart no matter how late we come home; who keeps us company when we are sick and feeling ugly; the one who offers unconditional love and who consoles us when all the therapies have failed, our boyfriend has left and our checkbook is empty. Who is that in the little fuzzy jacket anyway? Perhaps we should take a closer look—a look through the eyes of the heart.

In my own life, animals have been some of my greatest teachers and my life has been profoundly enriched by their presence. From them I have learned about joy, spontaneity, humor, acceptance, surrender, devotion, fidelity and death. Although there have been times when I have envied friends who traveled to far off places to visit gurus and spiritual teachers, looking back, I can see that I have been surrounded by gurus and teachers all along ... little furry ones! And when it comes to angels, I have begun to realize that many angels have whiskers and wet noses—even those winged ones with beaks!

Sharon Callahan is a writer, photographer, internationally recognized animal communication specialist and leading pioneer in the use of flower essences for the treatment of animals. For more information, visit www.anaflorea.com.

A Reminder to Play

By Rev. Kelly Isola

I spent an hour one morning watching deer. I wish I could say that I sat still and watched them meander, simply eating grass, but no, I got the camera out. There's something about looking at the world through my camera lens, finding an image, finding something new, maybe even finding myself.



Photo © Kelly Isola

There's a tendency to think that once you look through the viewfinder you have truncated the image of your world, of what you are seeing, which is true in the physical sense, but once I bring the camera up to my face and look through that tiny little rectangle window, my world changes.

As the camera slowly comes up to my eye, my breath catches for just a moment—I wonder what will emerge as I look through it. The anticipation of the unknown awakens my senses. I see colors, shapes and dimensions that weren't there before. I see the interconnectedness of all the elements. I not only see what is there, I see through it, and beyond it.

Isn't that what life is? Seeing beyond what's there? I spent an hour this morning watching the deer eat, roam and play. It was very funny—these teenage boys wrestling about, rolling around in the grass. I was sitting by myself laughing out loud and Murray, my cat, was looking at me wondering what was so funny. I bet he wished he had a camera too.


As I watched the deer, I heard the word “play” come out of my mouth. As the word left my lips and I heard it fade into the air, I felt a wave of sadness wash over my heart. I realized that too much time was spent being busy. I needed to play, to celebrate and to have a smile spread so big across my face I could see the tops of my cheeks.

I followed the thread of sadness in my heart to see where it would lead, and just like looking through my lens, I found myself seeing beyond the deer playing.

There was nothing especially different or exciting about what the deer were doing; they play like this many mornings outside my window. But I slowly began to see beyond their antics of running around, bleating, head butting and nipping at each other. Today, as I looked through the lens of my camera, I saw “playing” in the deepest sense. Playing is a spiritual practice specifically designed for humans to disengage the brain, to abandon what we know and just roll around in the grass.

Seeing beyond what was there, seeing the spiritual practice of play was like reading the Sunday comics and finding myself. Growing up, my mother would ask us on Sunday afternoons where we found ourselves in the comics that day. Was it in Beetle Bailey, Peanuts, Family Circle, or maybe the Wizard of Id? In so doing, the ordinary of my world was depicted as the extraordinary, the banal became comical, and the secular became sacred.

Saint Francis, Zen masters, Taoist sages, Hasidic storytellers, Hopi clowns and performance artists are all prophets who have encouraged me to play because honestly what I know probably isn't worth knowing, and what is worth knowing can't be known through the usual ways, or seen through the usual lens. Play is the joyful expression of my being. It is at the heart



Play is the joyful expression of my being.



of my creativity, my sexuality, and finally my most carefree and compassionate moments of devotion. It helps me live with absurdity, paradox, sadness, awe and mystery. It feeds my joy and wonder. It keeps my search for meaning down to earth, rolling around in the grass.

Rev. Kelly Isola, MDiv., is a dynamic evolutionary leader, speaker and writer. She holds a Masters of Divinity degree from Unity Institute® and Seminary and serves as the minister for Spiral Pathways, an alternative Unity ministry and an adjunct faculty member for the Spiritual Enrichment and Education Program (SEE) at Unity Institute. Kelly hosts her own Unity Online Radio program, *Spiraling Consciousness*. In 2010, Kelly became a certified Q Process Facilitator and a member of The Q Effect Associate's Team. She is co-author of the book *Who Have You Come Here to Be? 101 Possibilities for Contemplation*. For more information, visit www.kellyisola.com.

Raffel's Way

By Paula Coppel

I wished for a horse my whole life and finally got one when I was 45. Raffel is an Arabian horse who is not only a great ride and loving companion, but also a wise spiritual teacher.

Two of the greatest lessons he has taught me are how to be fully present, and how to surrender.

Because horses are prey for other animals, they tend to be fearful and vulnerable by nature. Everything, and I mean everything, has the potential to frighten them. A hollowed out log along the trail is a scary monster. A white plastic bag on the ground waving in the breeze is terrifying.

So when you own a horse, you learn to be as present and alert as your animal is, for your own safety. And therein lay the gifts: Learning to give complete attention to what is, right now; observing everything around you—how it looks, sounds, smells, moves—from the viewpoint of a large but very sensitive animal; noticing the signals your horse gives through his ears, his body and his movements.

Over time, this state of being present with one's horse becomes automatic. For me, it ensues as soon as I enter the barn. The sounds and scents engulf me and all my worldly cares drop away. My horse nickers to

me, and as I rub his warm, fuzzy coat, he rests his large white head on my shoulder.

At such moments, time seems to stand still. I am drawn into his spirit and to the great Spirit that embraces us all.

Raffel has also taught me about surrender.

A few years ago, I went with three riding buddies to a park outside Kansas City for a trail ride. We were in high spirits, ready for adventure.

But once at the park, our guide didn't show up. Three of us had never been there before, and the fourth had only been there once.

We debated whether to cancel the ride, but we'd come so far to get there, no one wanted to turn back. The woman who had been there before thought she remembered the trails well enough to lead us, so off we went.



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Forty-five minutes later, we were completely lost. The trails were steep, rocky and muddy—in some places nothing more than a narrow ravine as high as Raffel's shoulder. The horses labored hard to make their way.

Meanwhile, the sky was getting dark and we felt raindrops.

Whenever we got to the top of a trail, my friends and I would look around and pick what appeared to be a promising route down. But, inevitably, it would dead-end or lead us back to an upward-climbing slope.

On one especially arduous ascent, I suddenly realized that I was completely at my horse's mercy. There was nothing I could do to guide us home or even steer him around the rocks and mud holes. I had to totally rely on him to navigate the trail.

It was a terrifying yet exhilarating moment when I surrendered control to him.

I became nothing more than a passenger, holding on and praying for safe delivery. But, oddly, while it was frightening to trust and let go, it was also a great relief. I felt Raffel's strength beneath me, and I knew he would do his part. I held on, I encouraged him, I cheered



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for him—and ultimately, I felt closer to him than ever before. I could almost feel his pride and determination to bring us safely back—which, of course, he did.

I have thought since then how much relinquishing control to my horse is like surrendering to our higher power. Trusting and letting go is frightening at first, but then it is freeing. Always, always in times of need, we can let go and let God. God is the something stronger within that will carry us, the something greater that will lead us. We don't have to figure everything out on our own. We can surrender any situation to God and feel instantly at peace—knowing all will come around right, knowing we will be led safely home.



The Universe Answered

By Lila Herrmann

We had lost our beloved Jake, a 15-year-old Brittany, and Charlie, our elderly German shepherd, more than a year before and our house cried out for the vibrancy only a dog's presence can bring.

While walking through an art fair, we serendipitously came upon a pet adoption tent. There sat Francine, a Rottweiler/Shepherd mix with Groucho Marx eyebrows and intelligent, inquisitive eyes. I looked at my husband Jim and asked, "Why don't we take her home?" Jim listed all the reasons we had previously discussed as to why now wasn't the time for us to have a dog. We went home, to a very quiet house.

Some time later I happened across a pet adoption site online and there was Francine, eyebrows and all. Jim didn't believe the "just happened" part, but his interest was piqued. "Why don't you check the local shelter's site before we drive all the way out to that shelter where Francine is?"

At the shelter we walked from cage to cage, wondering, "Do you belong to us?" Remembering an article about how black dogs are adopted much less frequently, we began looking at all the big black dogs. They bounced, slobbered, ran and twirled. My heart was not in it. And then I stopped at the last cage in the row. A smaller lab mix stood on her hind legs as I approached the cage. Once on the leash, she turned

and looked at me, not once tugging or pulling or trying to run ahead. Her eyes said, "I'll go wherever you go." Murphy came home with us that day.

We had had two dogs before and wanted to continue that tradition. Francine with her Groucho Marx eyebrows was still available. The Universe was answering. Frankie, as we call her, came home too.

Frankie and Murphy remind us daily that we, as humans, make life way too complicated. You don't see dogs venting, pouting, hand-wringing or holding on to grudges. Frankie and Murphy live in the moment. They snap at each other, as family members can do, but then it's over. It doesn't get rehashed over dinner and brought up at family gatherings for years to come.



If we let the water bowl go dry, Frankie and Murphy let us know and they express appreciation when we rectify the situation. They don't stop speaking to us or lecture us ad nauseam about our irresponsible behavior.

No matter what the events of the day, Frankie and Murphy love us and are delighted to see us. Their happiness in being with us is in no way connected to how a conference call went or if the dishes got done or whether or not the car broke down. Love is for always, not just the good days.

There is a saying: God, please let me be the person my dog thinks I am. Amen to that!



All Creatures

By Rev. Joan M. Gattuso

Sandy, a friend who pet-sits, recently had an unusual assignment: to tend to two pigeons who lived caged in a house. The first pigeon was a deformed rescue bird. The pitiful female's head was attached nearly upside down, and if she had not been hand fed she would have quickly died. Later a male pigeon with two broken wings was rescued and became the cage-mate for the deformed female.

His wings healed, and he was set free back into nature. But, alas, he would not go. He was in love with the unsightly female. So the family relented and became caretakers of not one, but two pigeons.

Since both were staying, they needed names. So the family named them Crabtree and Evelyn. "How sweet," I said. "Does Evelyn respond to her name?" A smiling Sandy corrected me. "No, Joan, Evelyn is the male!"

Evelyn is completely devoted to Crabtree; he has gathered together a small trove of treasures—a piece of yarn, a charm, an artificial flower, artificial ivy, a string, a tiny twig—which he hides behind the credenza. Each morning when they are let out of their cages, Evelyn goes behind the credenza and one by one he picks up one of the treasures with his beak and presents them to Crabtree. In turn, Crabtree regally receives each one.

Animals have levels of consciousness that I believe we are not yet ready to realize.

Love and preciousness come in many forms. We have to be aware and awake enough to recognize them, however.

This love story can have meaning on multiple levels. Initially we can think, What a cute story. When we look deeper, we can be touched by the expression of affection, which then prompts us to wonder just how intelligent these feathered creatures of God are. What lessons can we learn from these two birds?

Beyond affection we can add love. Then we can add healing, compassion, generosity, caring, devotion and seeing beyond appearances. The list could go on, but surely you can see the value of emulating several of the qualities observed in Crabtree and Evelyn.

Best-selling author Joan Gattuso has studied with some of the world's best-known spiritual leaders, including the Dalai Lama. She wrote *A Course in Love* and *A Course in Life*. Her latest book, *The Lotus Still Blooms*, offers practical lessons on applying the principles of Buddhism. Joan is the founding minister of Unity of Greater Cleveland. This article originally appeared in her *Unity Magazine* column "Living a Noble Life" in the January/February 2010 issue.



Hogan's Heroes

By Laura Pfeifer

Many people would call us Hogan's Heroes. Yet, for the seven days Hogan blessed my family, he became ours.

Hogan, a 12-year-old German Shepherd/Hound mix, was discovered chained to a tree with no food or water, nearly starved to death, unable to stand because of a torn ACL in his rear left leg and covered in fleas. Mercifully, animal control officers found him and brought him to Animal Haven, a local animal shelter where I volunteer.



When Hogan arrived at Animal Haven, he was so weak he couldn't even roll up from his side to get food

or water. However, with loving care from the shelter staff and volunteers, he began eating and regaining his strength, and could eventually stand up on his three working legs.

Because of his age, size and years of neglect, Hogan's torn ACL couldn't be repaired. His "good" back leg was arthritic and weak, he needed treatment for

tapeworms from the flea infestation, and he had a cancerous bleeding tumor on his side.

Given his condition, it was decided that hospice care was the best option, and I reluctantly agreed to provide it in our home. Armed with medications, his favorite toys, a big pillow and lots of high-protein food, I carefully lifted him into the back of our SUV and took him home.

I knew his injured leg was hurting from his quiet moans. Yet he never growled at me or tried to bite. I was amazed by his immediate and unconditional trust. I set him up in a large area in the kitchen by a window where he could get fresh air, watch the birds, hear the laughter of children and enjoy a peaceful and happy life for whatever time he had left.

As he gained a little weight and got a little stronger, Hogan was determined to get up and do things himself. In the evenings, I would hear the jingle of Hogan's collar as he slowly got up on his three legs and made his way to the TV room to join us for a family evening. And he was determined to get himself out to our backyard to "do his business" even though it was a slow and exhausting process. He often had to rest after being up on his legs, so he would lie down for a bit and occasionally enjoy a roll on his back in the cool grass. His spirit and purpose were inspiring and heartbreaking at the same time.

On Hogan's seventh and final day with us, he went out to the yard as usual. However, on this day, his

“good” back leg was weaker, and he fell forward and hit his head on a patio chair. He never cried, and he wanted me to help him back up. I gently lifted him to his feet, and he bravely made his way to the yard once again, panting with exhaustion. I knew that I couldn’t watch him struggle like this anymore.

The vet came to the house, and we covered Hogan with kisses and loving words, while wiping away our tears. At the end, Hogan left this world surrounded by love, fresh air, a happy face and his big loving paw on us. His head rested peacefully in my stepdaughter Leah’s lap, and my face lay on his.

In just seven days, Hogan showed us the values of forgiveness, trust, unconditional love, courage, determination and gratitude. He taught us that joy comes from simple things like the kiss of a child, loving words, warm sunshine on your face, cool grass beneath you, a good belly rub, or a nice breeze through the window.

Yes, we cared for Hogan, and we grieved for him as if he’d been part of our family forever. Hogan became *our Hero*, and the lessons we learned from him will bless us for a lifetime. We are grateful.

Any glimpse into the life of an animal quickens our own and makes it so much the larger and better in every way. — John Muir

Affirmations for Pets

From the Silent Unity pamphlet
Not One ... Is Forgotten

Healing

You are God’s beloved creature.

God’s healing life, love and strength are now flooding every cell of your body, making you whole and well.

Missing Animals

You are God’s loving, obedient creature. You are led to your right place quickly and safely.

Mistreated Animals

You are God’s creature. Divine love surrounds, enfolds and protects you.



Finding a Home

I am divinely guided in finding the right home for you, the home that will foster your well-being, the home where you will contribute happiness and treasured companionship.

Protection

You are God's loving, intelligent creature. God's love protects and blesses you at all times.

Dealing With Loss

You are a beloved creation of God, and I release you into God's loving care.

Also: God, thank You for the time I have shared with Your beloved creature. I open my heart to Your guidance and comfort as I release this beloved animal into Your care.



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