

***Transforming Conversations: The Voices of Animals in the Interdependent Web***©

Sermon given by the Rev. Beth A. Johnson

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Essay by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott from *What Does it Mean to Be Human: Reverence for Life Reaffirmed by Responses from Around the World* ed. Frederick Franck, Janis Roze and Richard Connolly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000) 208-209.

This essay serves as the meditation text for  
*Transforming Conversations: The Voices of Animals in the Interdependent Web*

“In my peripheral vision there was a flash of greenish red, then a sickening thud against the windowpane. I jumped up from my desk, dreading what I would find – and, sure enough, on her side in the grass beneath my window lay a female cardinal. Nearby, her crimson partner stood his ground in anxious dignity.

The cat! I made a dive for the open door, lured the cat inside with the promise of treats, closed off her access to the out-of-doors. And then I waited. And waited. Hoped. And hoped. I knew these cardinals were recent parents. They had nested in a bush next to my bedroom window, and often they whistled me awake.

Would this “royal lady” ever witness the flying of her young?

About an hour later, the one eye that I could see came open, staring at first but with a gradually returning alertness. Good. Then she began to turn her head, cautiously righting herself. Later, a tentative hop. And finally, with great suddenness, she winged her way across the yard, low at first but then swinging upward.

What was it that stirred and lifted within me at her sudden return to glory? And what was it that did an inner dance later that day, when I saw her and her consort darting here and there across the front lawn, teaching their fledglings to fly?

How to name that sense of yearning connectedness, that interwoven oneness, that goddess-ground on which all being rests, that surging energy by which all things consist? I live and move within it, and it lives and moves within me, yet it is beyond my naming. Perhaps we might call it Love. Or Life.

To recognize and honor it is reverence.

To deny it is to delude oneself with the notion that differences like form, species, color, and function are ultimately important.

To deny connectedness is to deny reality. And that denial is merely a mistake, an illusion. Alas, however, in a world of diverse forms that certainly do appear to be separate and competing for scarce resources, the result of this illusion can be tragic. Inhumanity. Cruelty. Barbarism.

How then can we stimulate in one another the delicate fellow-feeling, the connected awareness, the reverence that deals not death but life? Here is our challenge, and it is a great one: to remind the human spirit that despite apparent differences, all of us have wings of one sort or another and are intended to fly.”

Have you ever had an experience similar to the one that Virginia Ramey Mollenkott describes in our meditation? Has it ever happened that you found yourself stirred and lifted by a longing that you found hard to name but which claimed you nonetheless? Been struck by the beauty of a sunset, the tenderness of a newborn animal, the terrible awe of winter's raging storms? What moves you about this beautiful, tragic world?

In her essay, taken from a collection gathered to explore and apply the ethic of reverence for life at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Mollenkott names a deep truth, an embodied knowledge, the wisdom of which opens us to a deeper, richer, fuller relationship with all of life; we are drawn into an awareness of relationality through her questions - the answers to which have the power to change us, the world, and our relationship with all beings.

First Mollenkott asks what *was* it in her that "stirred and lifted" and did an "inner dance" as she witnessed the bird's return to winging. She recognizes it as "a sense of yearning connectedness." Now to yearn means to be filled with longing or desire, and it also means to be deeply moved, especially with tenderness or sympathy. There is an intensity to this phrase - it names this connectedness as at once felt and elusive, we *know* it deep in our bodies, but are in some way estranged from it; hence the longing.

Mollenkott understands this as "an interwoven oneness, that goddess-ground on which all being rests; that surging energy by which all things consists." This is an experience of radical interconnectedness and interdependence with and through the processes of nature. The experience is one of immanence (a part of her) - it lives and moves within her; it is also an experience of transcendence (more than her) - she lives and moves within it. She suggests that we might call it Love or Life.

Mollenkott is describing a radically relational reality. A worldview long held by many indigenous peoples and now validated by physicists and cosmologists alike - one in which human beings are seen as part of the web of creation - a part of a living system- interdependent and interconnected with all that is. She is describing her apprehension of herself in relation to the web - the way she feels and sees it - her lens is one of profound oneness.

This worldview is affirmed in our UU 7th Principle: We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. The inclusion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle was important for the Unitarian Universalist Association. It affirmed that we, as Unitarian Universalists, are deepening our understanding of the place of human beings in the web of life. The 7<sup>th</sup> principle was a move away from an individualistic worldview to a communal one in which community includes all of creation. It is important. It is more than idea or a concept. The interdependent web of existence is a reality - it *is* reality. We live and move within it. It lives and moves within us.

I've come to think of this apprehension of the interdependent web of all existence, this feeling with creation and creatures, as an embodied conversation with life. And we UUs have done well in our conversations with the earth in general - with Gaia as a living system, with ecosystems and species of humans and other animals. We work to end global warming, to preserve endangered species, to eradicate poverty and pollution. We understand that part of the conversation pretty well I think. Don't you?

And Mollenkott is pointing us to a conversation that is deeper and broader, riskier and harder, and one, I suggest, that is imperative for us to enter into. It is the conversation ultimately capable of satisfying that yearning, that longing, because it invites us, plunges us, into the

fullness of our humanity and points to us who and what we really are and what we might become.

Mollenkott did not speculate upon the impact that the death of a single cardinal would have on that species of bird. She was drawn into the experience of a particular bird, an individual who could, and did, suffer and whose suffering she felt, whose restoration she hoped for and celebrated – which caused an inner dance. Hers was a profound, transforming conversation.

This kind of conversation deepens and extends the notion, not only of conversation, but also of who our conversation partners are. To be in such dialogue challenges us in its unremitting affirmation of the ability for all of the world to be in the dialogue – not just with other people (or limited to people we like), or companion animals or Bambi, but all of creation in its sweetness and fury, and all creatures the familiar and the alien, those near and far.

Yet we still often only dimly perceive the intimacy of our connectivity and our conversational capacity with the entire web of life. What might it be like for us to “hear into speech” the world that is around, in and through us? To recover sacred speech? And what would we hear? Surely we would hear the voices of individual animals.

For in this interdependent web are individuals that make up species, with hearts that beat like ours, and purposes of their own, with the ability to experience love and pain, comfort and terror. We can hear certain barks and meows, whinnies and some chirps. It is harder to hear some clucks and moos and oinks and bleating and the silence of the scaly ones. The voices not like our own call to us nonetheless, and it is so hard to hear them.

It is hard to hear them because we don't *see* them. I have a member of my congregation who has difficulty hearing. When I speak to her she needs to see me, to see my face. In order to be in conversation with her I need to bring my whole body. And so it is with certain other animals. It is hard to hear them because we don't see them – we don't see their bodies. When we go to the market and buy plastic-wrapped body parts of factory farmed animals we are removed from the being whose life was lived in terror and pain. We can't hear them.

When we buy beauty products and household cleaners from large manufacturers we don't see the bodies upon which the products were tested cruelly and unnecessarily. We can't hear them.

We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence. The web is both impersonal *and* personal. Bodies count. We could not do this to beings that we know.

But such is our life as moderns, we might say. Most of us are not agrarian people nor do we create the goods we use. We depend on others for our food and products. Indeed, this is true and, I suggest, that this does not preclude our being in conversation with those beings whose bodies are used and abused and the systems that perpetuate the abuse. In fact, I suggest that it means we must listen more carefully.

It is through such transforming conversations that we can nurture and be nurtured, and through which reverence for life can be realized. We are called by UUs for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to move from “the mere celebration of the ‘interdependent web of existence’ into practices that affirm species interdependence in our everyday personal, social, economic and political lives.” We are called to deep justice-love to “stimulate that delicate fellow-feeling that deals not death but life.” It is only by engaging with all of the complex factors that contribute to the suffering of animals that we can live out the prophetic promise and possibilities of our 7<sup>th</sup> principle.

For some vegetarianism is the result of this conversation. For us in this country it is both a reasonable and healthy choice to be considered. The land that we use to feed our meat could literally yield enough to feed the world. And there are alternatives to wearing wool and fur and leather – we don't need to wear animals either.

For some this awareness leads them to seek alternatives to factory-farmed animals. I know of someone who buys range free chickens and refuses to buy them cut up. She says she doesn't want to forget that they were bodies. She is in conversation with them.

Here you might ask, isn't it true that life feeds on life? Doesn't it seem that animals are cruel to each other? They kill each other, steal a baby bird out of its nest, our beloved cat kills bugs. What of that? You may, rightly, ask. Predation is a necessity of survival for many animals. Most do not kill unnecessarily, unlike a certain species with which I am deeply familiar, and even if they do, it is not moral justification for us as humans to do.

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote, "whether or no it be for the general good, life is robbery." We could stop there to make a case for merely taking life, but he pushes us further. Life is robbery. "It is at this point," writes Whitehead, "that with life morals becomes acute. The robber requires justification."<sup>i</sup> So we are asked by being in conversation with life, to be accountable to life; to justify the taking of life.

Of course there are differences between animals, between vertebrates and invertebrates, between those with greater or lesser degrees of central nervous system development and in our daily lives we make choices and decisions based on those distinctions – yet as Darwin noted these are differences in degree, not in kind.

We intuitively know that nonhuman beings have depth and sentience that often touches our souls. Perhaps you've seen it – caught the eyes of another being looking into yours and been startled by the recognition.

There are countless illustrations of nonhuman beings' capacity to feel grief and even make judgments. Elephants will slow to rescue a fallen companion; they bury and mourn their dead. Hearing of these sensibilities in elephants it is no wonder that when they are confined and away from kin in circuses that they sometimes rebel.

Albert Schweitzer, from whom we gained the beautiful, profound and redemptive ethic of reverence for life, recounted a story of geese in Scotland, who when a companion was caught and its wings clipped, remained with their companion until such time as the bird's feathers grew enough to allow it to resume its flight. The story reminds us that the beings we see as so different from ourselves to have the capacity of care and the will to live.<sup>ii</sup>

There are numerous other examples that nonhuman animals have subjectivity far beyond what we humans have thought or have even wanted to know.

As in all things there is no black and white – we live with ambiguity. We weigh the needs of growing populations with the habitat of other animals. When faced with a life and death situation we would save the baby over the companion animal – but many will risk their lives trying to save both.

And I claim no moral high ground. While I don't buy products tested on animals, I did not refuse the chemotherapy drugs that probably saved my life, even though they were no doubt tested on animals, and I am not at all certain that the animals were treated in a humane way and their suffering considered. I can only now witness to their sacrifice on my behalf and support those working to finding alternatives to that practice.

I speak of these things not out of some maudlin sentimentality, or to be mean, or to shock, but because they tell us that there is a level of the conversation we are not yet able or willing to hear. I am inviting us into this hard, complex, transforming conversation. Asking the question, “How can we stimulate in one another the delicate fellow-feeling, the connected awareness, the reverence that deals not death but life?”

For those who are not necessarily moved as is Mollenkott, and as am I, by a connection to individual animals, and I acknowledge that we are not all moved in the same way and by the same things, we can turn to those sensibilities that inform our sense of justice and morality. As Unitarian Universalists we have historically cared about the suffering of others and worked to end oppressions. This is another arena in which our work is needed. These are the sensibilities from which we may draw to live into the imperative of interconnectedness. To live fully the 7<sup>th</sup> principle of respect for the interdependent web of all existence we are called to hear all of the voices, see all the bodies, dissolve the illusion of separateness, to seek to end inhumanity, cruelty, barbarism.

It is time that we, as a species, begin to act on behalf of nonhuman life, to account for the suffering of other beings, and I would call us, as Unitarian Universalists, to take our place, no, I call us to lead the way, among those who call for reverence for life, for the taking of life sparingly and with compassion, and for the dismantling of the systems that support the disregard for the suffering of animals and the denigration of the Earth.

How we live matters – to other beings, to the web of life. This web of life is challenging and rewarding, beautiful and tragic, tender and terrible. Entering into conversation with the web of life means that we will be open to possibilities of relationship that are at once demanding and stunning.

But you might ask does this not mean that we will live with a broken heart? And I would say yes, for to enter into the experience of and with another is to love, and to love is to risk a broken heart. But the heart is redeemed, and the risk rewarded, and the love deepened by a richness and intensity of experience without which we would most certainly be impoverished.

As I close let the words of Mary Oliver instruct us here:

“You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”<sup>iii</sup>

Friends, as we hear these words we are reminded that our place in the family of things is that of cohabitant, of co-creator, of lover.

And we are not alone in our loving – we are in conversation with all of life, in each moment – we need only listen deeply, with all of our being, let us nurture all life and listen to those whose voices are not like our own. Let them teach us of mutuality, dignity and love – and let us be transformed.

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Notes for sermon

<sup>i</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 105.

<sup>ii</sup> Albert Schweitzer, “The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” published this article in the periodical *Christendom* [1936]: 225-39.

<sup>iii</sup> Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese,” in *Owls and Other Fantasies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 1.

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