

FRIENDLY WITH BEARS

A homily given for the Blessings of the Animals Service by

The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on

Sunday, October 14th, 2018

As timeless children's books remind us, some of the earliest lessons we learn about love and life, we learn from animals. On illustrated pages, creatures walk and talk and befriend humans, particularly the littlest ones. From a young age, then, we get the sense that animals have emotional lives a bit akin to our own. In such children's books, different kinds of animals co-exist and interact in engaging and obviously entertaining ways. The unlikely menagerie that fills A.A. Milne's series of Winnie the Pooh books is perhaps one of the world's best known instances of a vividly imagined, thoroughly wondrous, and oddly kind interspecies community.

Deep in that Hundred Acre Woods where Christopher Robin plays, we find that Bear of Very Little Brain, Pooh, living alongside Piglet and Rabbit and Owl and little Roo and his mother Kanga and bouncing Tigger and melancholy Eeyore. Together they have adventures and misadventures aplenty. They have frequent disagreements and also stubborn bonds of affection amongst them. What becomes clear over the course of their shared histories and Milne's four volumes is that the indelible nature of each creature will out.

That game of Pooh Sticks that was recounted during our Time for All Ages is much more than mere child's play. It describes a confluence of events down by a river where every creature's choices have

consequences for the others. These creatures mostly assume that they will create trouble for one another, and usually they do - Tigger bounces Eeyore into the water, after which Pooh almost smashes him with a rock, all while Rabbit interferes and Piglet frets. Where we find the comedy and I dare say poignancy in their repeated encounters is in those very places where they are determined to help each other despite themselves, in spite of their often contradictory natures.

Those of us who grew up with characters in children's books such as Milne's or with stuffed animals in the house, much as Christopher Robin did in his boyhood home, likely imagined these strange creatures had a special concern for us. In return, we had a concern for and perhaps preoccupation with them. We worried when they were alone or if they were lost. They gave us opportunities to mentally practice love and care. We imagined them into life because we believed them worthy of it, and because we understood how much fuller our lives felt with them it, enriching our budding imaginations and expanding our capacity for empathy. "Some people care too much," Pooh explains in one of Milne's books. "I believe it's called love."

So it does not sound like overstatement to call such wise (if fictive) creatures our spiritual teachers. American author Benjamin Hoff contended just this in his best-selling book The Tao of Pooh, which drew connections between Winnie the Pooh and the eastern philosophy of Taoism. Hoff calls Winnie the Pooh one of "the Great Masters of Wisdom", and notes that in Chinese, the written character P'u is defined as "natural, simple, plain, and honest." What this Bear of Very Little Brain helps us remember is this childlike truth, Hoff

writes, that “the Enchanted Place is right where you are, and if you’re Friendly with Bears, you can find it.”

Although I myself am an inveterate cat lady, I try to stay friendly with bears, too. Pooh and assorted pals remind us that even when something unexpected or unpleasant confronts us, existence itself always retains some measure of enchantment. Day to day, these creatures appreciate the privilege of being alive and manage to enjoy their surroundings - whether on a blustery day or a sunny one. They have mastered that task the poet Mary Oliver issued: “You have only to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves”. In one of the sweetest exchanges in all of children’s literature, when Piglet ask Pooh how to spell love, Pooh says: “You don’t spell it... You feel it.”

Having creature companions lets us fulfill a chief human task of extending love and care. We speak a great deal about the individual’s need to be loved, but additionally and importantly, individuals have a deep need to give love. Sometimes I think that’s the deepest of our needs, honestly; if that need gets thwarted, the results are tragic. Because certain animals have a talent for accepting love, they fulfill an indispensable role in people’s lives. They welcome our affection and even return it. Our relationships with them can be utterly transformative.

In one of Milne’s books, there’s a magical moment when Piglet explains his suddenly taking hold of Pooh’s paw by saying, “I just wanted to be sure of you”. Positive relationships with animals make us sure both of them and ourselves; we’re reminded that the capacity to form secure and lasting bonds is a universal life force. When we

watch video clips of interspecies friendships online - a dog and a parrot, say, or a deer and kitten - we recall that trusting tenderness between Piglet and Pooh and understandably touched by it.

Whether we have pets in our household or volunteer for animal shelters or foster rescue dogs or track birds' migratory patterns for the Audubon Society or contribute financially to environmental causes or cat-sit for a neighbor, there are many ways for us to express our natural - and I day say - instinctual fondness for creature life. We also have a religious need, I believe, to reverence what the great mystic St. Hildegard of Bingen called "life of the lives of creatures, spiral of sanctity, bond of all natures", including our own.

When you read that Unitarian Universalist principle of "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," you might indeed hear it "over and over announcing your place in the family of things", as Mary Oliver wrote. Animals remind us that we are not alone in the created order (never were!) and that we are happiest when we are intentional about sharing it with other manifold and marvelous living things.

So we bless these amazing animals we have known — in the particular or in the abstract — because they have taught us, since our earliest years, what it really means to be fully human and entirely alive. They showed us how instinctive and uncomplicated love can be. "Sometimes the smallest things take up the most room in your heart," Milne writes in Winnie the Pooh. Sometimes they can make your heart much, much bigger than you would have ever guessed it could grow. That's the best blessing of all.