

The Animals Will Teach You

By Justin on Sep 25, 2022

Ask the animals, and they will teach you, the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.

Job 12:7-10

In this brief passage from the book of Job we learn that all forms of life have something to teach us. The animals, the birds, the plants, and the fish are all named together as beings who can teach us. Of course, in the modern world, we would consider birds and fish to also be animals. So really it is saying that both plants and animals have wisdom all their own.

Later on in the book, God asks Job, "Who gives the ibis (a kind of bird) wisdom or gives the rooster understanding?" Of course, the unsaid answer to that question is undoubtedly God, who gives all creatures whatever particular wisdom they may possess.

In nature we often see different kinds of animals living together in symbiotic relationships. There are fish who live in the shadows of sharks. The sharks do not eat these fish but rather let them swim freely inside their mouth. The fish clean the shark's teeth and live on the scraps of what they have eaten.

The shark has one kind of wisdom and the little fish has another. Both live and grow together, mutually benefiting from their shared wisdom. Dogs and humans, as an example, go as far back as history can record. We evolved in unison with each other. We have come into existence hand in hand with one another.

In this process of sharing wisdom, humans and dogs have developed a friendship. As the old saying goes, "a dog is a man's best friend." Wisdom calls us into friendship. Human beings have a remarkable sort of wisdom. We see things in a way that no other animal can.

Yet, our wisdom is not complete in itself. We can see that human ingenuity can be a source of death as much as it can be a source of life. When we forget our animal neighbours, who are also our cousins, our wisdom becomes self serving.

But this disjointed and chaotic wisdom which humanity seems to have right now is not the only way. We can open our hearts and minds to the ancient song which all of nature sings. There is a natural harmony of wisdom and friendship which is beckoning us to return to it.

When we allow the wisdom of animal being to inform our own, we will no longer destroy the earth for our own short term gain, but rather see, with eyes unclouded by ignorance, that our well being is forever entwined with the well being of all life on earth.

One of my favourite authors of all time was [Aelred of Rievaulx](#), who lived on the Scottish/English border in the high middle ages. He was a contemporary of [Hildegard of Bingen](#) and Bernard of Clairvaux, who are both worth mentioning.

Aelred wrote a book called [Spiritual Friendship](#) where he describes friendship as the natural state of all creatures. The book is primarily an exploration of human relationships and the art of contemplation, however he begins by talking about how all creatures from pebbles in a riverbed to angels on high desire and seek friendship in all things. When talking about animals specifically he said,

“They so follow the leader, so frolic together, so express and display their attachment in actions and sounds together, and so enjoy one another’s company with eagerness and pleasure that they seem to relish nothing more than what resembles friendship.”

One of the signs of the holiness of the saints in the ancient and medieval world was friendship with animals. One of my favourite saints was named Kevin. He was a hermit who lived in a cave at the edge of a lake.

One day he dropped his prayer book into the lake and was very distraught about it. But before long an otter swam down to the bottom and retrieved it for him. The same otter returned many times with gifts of fish for Kevin.

On another occasion Kevin was doing a traditional spiritual practice called a cross vigil. To do it, you stick your arms out to the sides in the position of the cross and

hold it until your arms are too tired and fall back down. The cross vigil was a way to connect with Christ's suffering on the cross during a time of deep prayer.

Anyway, at this particular instance, a small blackbird landed in his outstretched palm and began to make her nest. Rather than shooing her away, Kevin held his cross vigil with the nest in his palm until the baby birds had hatched and flown away.

In both these cases animals participate with Kevin in his prayers. The otter was concerned that Kevin would not be able to make his prayers. The blackbird trusted him so much that she placed her eggs in his tender care during his prayers. There was a deep friendship between Kevin and the animals of the forest where he lived. Not only did they live together, but they prayed together as well.

The whole purpose of Kevin's cross vigil was to share in Christ's suffering in an embodied way. Just like Christ, Kevin cared for the least of all creatures. His compassion for the bird inspired him to pick up his cross and suffer for her sake, just like Christ had suffered for his.

Kevin's prayer led him into friendship with the animals and that same friendship blessed him and aided him in his life of prayer. In the same way, even if less dramatic in our real lives, as we open our hearts to animal being and develop a true spiritual friendship with all of God's creatures, our prayer life deepens.

The way that Kevin's friendships with the animals depend his prayer life is not unlike the way that Aelred describes it happening with his fellow monks. I would like to read you two short passages from Aelred which talk about true friendship and how it leads us into prayer.

In this first passage Aelred describes the kind of friendship he and his fellow monks share:

"The day before yesterday as I was walking around the monastery, with the brothers sitting in a most loving circle, I marvelled at the leaves, blossoms, and fruits of each single tree as if I were in the fragrant bowers of paradise. Finding not one soul whom I did not love and, I was sure, not one soul by whom I was not loved, I was filled with joy that surpassed all the delights of the world. Indeed, coursing through me, I could say with the prophet, 'See how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to live in unity'"

I assume that when he refers to blossoms and fruits he means the flowering of the love in their hearts and the fruits of the spirit which they have developed. He will use that same metaphor again in the second passage.

Either way, his friends are a loving circle of unity which fills him with joy, and that's pretty beautiful. In this second passage Aelred takes the teachings a little further by describing how his prayers on behalf of his friends become a mystical experience of Christ:

“Thus by praying to Christ for a friend and desiring to be heard by Christ for a friend, we focus on Christ with love and longing. Then sometimes suddenly, imperceptibly, affection melts into affection, and somehow touching the sweetness of Christ nearby, one begins to taste how dear he is and experience how sweet he is. Thus rising from that holy love with which a friend embraces a friend to that by which a friend embraces Christ, one may take the spiritual fruit of friendship fully and joyfully into the mouth, while looking forward to all abundance in the life to come.”

This friendship which is the doorway into mystical union with Christ is something which is natural to us. We are predisposed to kindness and compassion by virtue of our being the image of God. If we allow that love to shine out through our friendships, that is itself a prayer.

When we open up the horizons of who we consider our friends, the light gets even brighter. It is good and proper for us to love other human beings, but it is even better for us to love all creatures from the depths of our being.

Animals have their place in the great circle of life just like we do, just like the plants do, just like the stars do. If we look deeply enough into the eyes of our animal kin we will see our own faces reflected, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

So, my new friends in Christ, I encourage you to learn from the animals. Open your heart and mind to what wisdom they may have and humble yourself enough to enter their world, at least on occasion. Speak to the squirrels as you walk past them. Say a blessing upon the pigeons in the park.

When you set aside time to pray for those in need, do not neglect the animals. Their world is falling apart around them and their homes are disappearing. They are in need of your prayers, and of your actions. Lift up the plight of animal being

before God and pray for them. Put yourself in their shoes long enough to see that their struggles are as real as your own.

Make every creature of God your friend because when you do, that same friendship will lift you up into friendship with Christ. Be like Kevin and live in harmony with the animals. Join in the great hymn of creation which is being sung all around you.

As the psalmist says, “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy. Let all creation rejoice before the Lord.” May it be so. Amen

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