**A Dog’s Dream**

**Rev. David Kraemer**

**Chalice Lighting**

It has been an eventful week, beginning with the demonstration by white nationalists in Charlottesville, met by protesters who stood up for us as a nation and a society, who stood against hate, and racism, and fascism, and fear – evils that would destroy our nation.

I cannot speak of these as protesters and counter-protesters, as defenders of alternate perspectives. As much as I preach against the false divide that preoccupies our civic discourse, I cannot see these as two sides of an argument. Evil is the absence of good. Fear must be met with courage. Hate must be met by love.

Our nation must be grateful for Heather Heyer, who gave her life defending our freedom. My heart goes out to her family, and to the families of the police officers who died in the helicopter crash in the midst of that tumult.

When the moral compass of our nation is spinning, it is necessary for us to find our own true direction. At the end of the week I was heartened by all those who responded again in Boston to stand against the evil. I want to stand with them. Here is hope. Here is love.

I am mindful that ours is not the only locus of conflict in the world, that worth and dignity is threatened all over, in Spain, in Asia, in South America, across the globe. I can speak of the wrong in front of me, and must know it is only a part.

And then tomorrow, we will witness a celestial event of far greater magnitude. I am struggling to link these two things, the eclipse of the American Dream at the beginning of last week and the actual eclipse of the sun at the beginning of this week, and I’m sorry, I can’t. My words are just not doing it.

I’m left singing over and over again in my head words from a hymn from a memorial service for my uncle-in-law this summer – “when I in awesome wonder, consider all … thy power throughout the universe displayed”

This is why we worship, to lay ourselves at the feet of the universe and say “My God! How great *thou* art.”

Today, we are back down here with our feet planted firmly on the green earth, celebrating life, the gift of our own lives, and the gift of the lives of the creatures with whom we share this planet. Today is the Blessing of the Animals, and I see that we are joined by a mighty chorus. Welcome, whoever you are, whatever shouts or howls or barks or purrs of acclamation you can offer. Let us worship together.

**Reading**

From “The First Principle Project” website:

*To different people, being means various things. For some, being refers to anything that is alive, and would include plants. For others, being does not refer to plants or fungi. Some see being as referring to those species that are sentient. This raises the question, what do we mean by sentient? This too has variable meanings, but mostly refers to the ability to perceive or feel things, such as being able to feel, see, hear, smell, or taste. Sentience also means being aware. Some too would see being as something that exists or is thought to exist, and might include rocks, mountains, river, the earth, or anything that makes up part of the whole of existence.*

*Regardless of how each defines “being” the goal is to grow our circle of compassion for individuals, including ourselves, as we grow our own sense of belonging to and interconnecting with all of existence.*

**Message**

Do dogs dream?

How do you know?

I mean sometimes when they’re sleeping you see their legs move, or their eyebrows go up and down. They whimper or even bark.

It looks like they might be chasing squirrels.

But how do you know they’re actually dreaming?

Maybe these are just responses from the autonomic nervous system, nervous tics, like hitting your knee with a hammer. Some signal from their limbic brains causes them to move in a way that looks like the same experience we have when we dream.

But dogs can’t tell you whether they are actually dreaming.

So how do you know?

This was the question posed in one of my first classes in philosophy, long ago as an undergraduate. It was used to introduce a section on epistemology, which is the study of what it means to know.

This is a classic question – the difference between appearance and reality. Plato gives us the famous allegory of the cave, in which prisoners are chained inside, facing a blank wall, upon which shadows play. A light from somewhere behind them – which they can’t see because they are unable to turn around – shines against objects which are then projected upon the wall. For all the prisoners know, what they see is all there is. It is reality. But it’s not. And so Plato argues, that’s how the world is – a shadow image of the real world that lies somewhere beyond.

It’s the same question that Rene Descartes asks himself maybe 2000 years later – how do I know what I know? His answer is the equally famous Cogito Ergo Sum, I think, therefore I am. If I was not, how could I even think about not being?

You can carry this to extremes. Into the idea of solipsism, which is the idea that nothing exists beyond my self. You all, might be nothing more than figments of my imagination. My dream, as it were.

But this is kind of a rathole of rationality that brings us to absurd conclusions. Its main purpose might only be to bother undergraduate students long enough to get them to pay attention.

And paying attention is what it’s all about.

Spirituality is sometimes said to be the art of noticing. It’s why the Dalai Lama speaks of meditation as a deep awareness. And why racial justice advocates speak of staying woke.

In the same way we can recognize connection, we can know things, we can know each other, by noticing, by paying attention.

We have a fascination, I think, with whether animals can talk. Think Dr. Doolittle or Mr. Ed. But communication does not depend entirely on talking. We know this among our own species. Depending on how you cut it, between 55 and 90 percent of communication is nonverbal. We pick up clues from each other in our posture, in our tone of voice, in our own eyebrows going up and down. Partners who have been together a long time can communicate sometimes with a barely audible mumble.

(Not that you should rely upon this. I’m going to tell you, be clear with your partner – talk to them -- if you want your relationship to last.)

But it is in the noticing, that we come to know.

So I’m going to tell you, yes, dogs dream. It’s clear. Just look at them.

Animals might get this even better than we do. There is old expression, that dogs can smell fear. But I think it’s more than that. I think they may be tuned in to the nonverbal especially because, they are non … verbal.

Dogs are not bothered by their Myer’s Briggs evaluations or Enneagram scores. They maybe don’t have the same kind of self-narrative running in their heads that so often gets in the way of our understanding. And so they “know” stuff about you that you might not even be aware of. Hence the rise of therapy animals, their use in all kinds of human disorders.

Maybe some particular dogs or cats are more inclined to this work, maybe that’s the worth of Myer’s Briggs and Enneagrams in our own species. They give us an idea of our disposition.

But whether you are a dog or a human I do not believe you are locked in to a “type.” I do believe we have capabilities far greater than we know. I do believe we are trainable.

And so if you are a dog and you are a pit bull you can still be a sweet, loving family pet. And if you are a human and you are a T on the Myer’s Briggs scale – a thinker, not a feeler –you can develop empathy. To say “Well I’m just not that way,” is a self-imposed limitation.

This is not to say that all are equally abled, God forbid that we would be, what a dull world it would be if we all were cookie cutter copies of each other. But if you think that maybe like the Tin Man, you don’t have a heart, well I would invite you to think on this, practice, pay attention.

This is what it means to have agency. To change. To choose.

One choice we make is to be here together, in covenant. A covenant is an agreement, not a creed. We, as Unitarian Universalists, often consider ourselves to be covenantal, as opposed to creedal, people. We don’t say you have to believe in a certain set of statements. We come to agreement with one another in how we are to be in the world.

Our Seven Principles – which might be as close to a creed as we get – are in fact, a covenant. They begin “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, *covenant* to affirm and promote:”

This current set of principles was last revised and approved in 1986. It is important to know that this covenant can be, and in fact, has been revised.

At one time, there were just six principles, and they didn’t read the same. And there is right now movement afoot to revise, and possibly add to, our principles.

In particular, a group within our ranks – called the First Principle Project -- has been working since 2013 on a possible revision of the first principle, to change it from “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” to “the inherent worth and dignity of every being.”

Which includes your dog.

The reading that Jackie offered just before this message comes directly from the First Principle Project website. The vision of the effort is that “By understanding the inherent worth and dignity of every being, Unitarian Universalists live deeply in joy and compassion, nourishing themselves as they nurture, care for, and protect the many others in a multispecies world.”

The goals here are to extend our compassion to all creatures with whom we share the earth, to develop our own capacity for care, to live into being the interconnectedness which we affirm in our seventh principle.

The First Principle Project recognizes the tension in our society that is reflected in these two principles – whether it is more important to care for the individual or to care for the whole. By naming all beings, we might bind ourselves more closely to a kind of care that does not overlook the effect of the whole upon individual, whoever or whatever that individual might be.

To change a principle, to revise the covenant, requires a change in the bylaws of the UUA, which would be voted upon at a June General Assembly. To get on the agenda for GA, at least one whole district, or at least 15 congregations, has to vote to get the amendment on the agenda.

In fact, that happened just this June, at General Assembly in New Orleans. Fifteen congregations got together to agree to move this forward, and so there was a question on the agenda to decide whether to change “every person” to “every being.”

For me, I think this project raises a lot of questions just within its own scope, not the least of which is whether religion isn’t a wholly human project. The first principle, you might say, invites us into covenant, and there is a mutuality in covenant that implies intent on both sides. Can there really be covenant when intention is not shared?

This also might raises questions about animal consumption. Or medical research. Even the act of keeping a pet can be seen as human-centric, a kind of animal slavery, even if it’s benevolent.

The First Principle Project acknowledges some of these concerns and tries to address them. What it says is that:

“The current principle does not give specific instructions on how we are to nourish and heal. Instead it is a vision that we agree to work towards, affirming and promoting in the ways that each congregation can.

“The proposed new First Principle carries this same vision forward, including that it does not dictate how you should promote worth and dignity of every being. This is left to the conscience of the individual and to the shared lives of the member congregations.”

The worth of the call here, I think, is to increase our respect, just as we increase our respect with each other. It is to recognize the dependence we have upon the world – and the creatures within it – and to be mindful of that dependence.

But the most immediate argument against this change – the one that was front and center at General Assembly – is that we, as a society and as a church – do not yet extend worth and dignity even within our own species. We do not live in to the First Principle even as it stands.

In this society, people of color are still not co-equal with white people. Indigenous people continue to feel the grinding wheels of imperialism ravage their lands. Wealth is ridiculously misallocated. Health care as a right for all is a continuing struggle. And state legislatures continue to entertain bills that would prevent people from just using the bathroom where they feel comfortable.

The problem of race, in particular, is not just a problem of White Nationalism rearing its ugly head in Charlottesville. It is not in just segregated neighborhoods. Not just in our racially loaded judicial system. Not just in yet another unarmed black man shot by a police officer.

It is here, inside of our movement. Inside our buildings. It is the cultural soup we simmer in that keeps white people in position of power, of supremacy – which is to say White Supremacy.

It is why we, as Unitarian Universalists, who claim we are not racist, who resolve and advocate for racial justice, who by and large have no problem with affirmative action or with planting a Black Lives Matter sign in the yard, nevertheless pass over candidates of color for positions of authority in our church structure, our ecclesia, and instead promote white men into leadership.

What we say and what we do are not the same. Our actions are speaking, not our words. We have work to do. We have logs in our own eyes. To entertain the idea of extending worth and dignity to all beings distracts us from the most immediate work we must do in extending worth and dignity to each other.

And so, as this came up for a vote, Rev. LoraKim Joyner, a veterinarian and Unitarian Universalist Minister who has been hired to lead this effort, sought procedural changes that would put off the vote. We are not yet ready to do this, she said. And delegates at General Assembly voted to table that motion to change “persons” to “beings.” I voted along with them.

One question asked by the First Principle Project is “How do we understand reality and what is our response to this?”

That’s always our big question: What’s really real? And how do we live our lives because of it?

Again, from the First Principle Project materials:

“The First Principle as it exists now provides a vision, leading us to individually and collectively embody our call to compassion for all. It invites us to come together to find out how we can support one another to live deeply so that all people may live well. Though action is implied, the First Principle is more about questioning, seeking, and faith. Guiding us to look beyond creeds, formulas, or specific actions or practices, the First Principle asks us to stay engaged with reality and in relationships, though we struggle with the harshness of life and the complex interplay of human nature as it both cares for and harms others. Lighting the way forward, this principle supports us in being open to the other, for we are a faith founded on continuous revelation. Everyone has something to teach us, no matter the individual or species.”

There is, in fact, another effort afoot to add an eighth principle – one that would address racial justice. Tabling the effort to change “person” to “being” might allow that to move forward. And then one day, for this broader consideration to come forward. That could be our dream.

In the meantime, I can affirm that “everyone has something to teach us, no matter the individual or species.”

It is in paying attention, in noticing, that we may come to know. And then, how to respond.