



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “A Question of Worth”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*The good [person] is the friend of all living things.* Mahatma Gandhi

*Even in the worm that crawls in the earth there glows a divine spark.  
When you slaughter a creature, you slaughter God.* Isaac Bashevis Singer

*We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person [or being?].* UUA First Principle †

### Sermon:

I begin with two brief readings. The first is from the Qu’ran (6:38):

There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth,  
Nor a being that flies on its wings,  
but (forms part of) communities like you.  
Nothing have we omitted from the book,  
and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end. (*In Praise of Animals*, by Gary Kowalski, page 10)

The second reading is an excerpt from a longer piece by Biruté Galdikas, an expert primatologist.

When I look at orangutans I am reminded that we are only human. Our appearance on the earth was relatively recent; orangutans are far older, as a species, than we are. I wonder, when *Homo erectus* strode into Asia: were orangutans watching from the trees? It is a humbling thought. (*In Praise of Animals*, page 18)

Have you ever loved an animal?

French poet and novelist Anatole France expressed that, “Until one has loved an animal, part of one’s soul remains unawakened.” I think he’s saying that human to animal relationships are powerful, heart-opening, humanity-giving connections. That there is something missing in our lives if we do not have a cross-species experience or relationship.

I am not a pet owner, but while my kids were growing up, we experienced a bit of the evolutionary tree of life. We first had goldfish, then hermit crabs, then a hamster. When I was a child I had a puppy for a few weeks, until my mother got thoroughly fed up with being its primary caregiver and we gave the rambunctious pup to a better home. Even though my experience with

pets is limited, every time I see a puppy on television my heart feels strangely warmed, to use the words of Methodism's founder, John Wesley.

There's something indescribable yet heart-warming about a dog wagging its tail at you or the sandpaper licks of a cat on your hand. And even if we can't share an overly intimate relationship with a bird or fish, when we watch an eagle soar, our own spirits seem to soar as well. And when we watch a fish swimming, even in a tank, our blood pressure drops and we feel more calm.

Animals hold a powerful spell over our lives. And, as Galdikas points out, they were living on planet earth long before humans walked the savannas of Africa or Asia. We were creatures long before we were humans, and our creatureliness remains with us. We *are* animals.

I find it ironic that the word animal comes from the Latin *anima*. Anima means life essence or soul. When a woman is lively, she is animated. Inanimate is to be without life. Anima is related to the word *animus*, meaning temper and rational mind or intellect. These attributes we generally assume are limited to humans. We might want to separate ourselves from the animals because we may believe we are uniquely endowed with intellect and conscious awareness, but more and more research proves this untrue. Elephants grieve for their dead, chimpanzees use tools to accomplish tasks, and whales and song birds seem to sing for joy, not just to find mates or warn others. The line between human and animal faces perhaps complete erosion.

We humans are completely interconnected with all other beings. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of this connection when he said:

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.

King was speaking of human to human relations, but I think it is still true with human to non-human species. Given our interdependence and interconnectedness (which science and our Seventh Principle affirm), do we dare be dismissive of another specie's value? We've seen how deer populations go unchecked when natural predators no longer exist in their habitat. We suffer increased incidences of Lyme disease, car accidents, and even garden thievery as a result. When the web of life is disturbed, the consequences cannot always be predicted.

In some religious traditions, animals don't have souls. Humans are allowed to dominate them, to be their masters. This justifies inhumane treatment of food-source animals, flagrant abuse of household pets, caging animals for entertainment in zoos or circuses, or trophy-hunting endangered animals for sport. Defining animals as less than human sounds familiar to how white slave owners defined those they kept enslaved. It's easier to treat the 'less human' disrespectfully and disgracefully. We might consider that parallel when considering this change to our First Principle.

Animals suffer like us. Animals grieve like us. Animals hunger like us. Animals form bonds like us. Animals feel joy like us. Animals feel pain like us. Are animals just like us? Are we justified in treating them differently from us? And if so, why? Human privilege and dominance?

It makes no sense to me to separate humanity from the rest of the sentient animal kingdom. I believe we should treat all living beings with worth and dignity. I believe we should change

Unitarian Universalism's First Principle to state we affirm and promote "the inherent worth and dignity of every being," and not limit it to 'every person'. If we make this change, what would the consequences be to your and my life?

Would we all need to become vegans? Give up our leather shoes? For some of us, that might be the case. Each of us will decide how to live out the principle in whatever manner our conscience dictates, just as we do now.

For those who like me would rather not give up eating meat, we might become more involved in promoting humane treatment of food-source animals. We might try buying from local sources that meet known standards. We might buy free-range chickens, and through our economic power encourage changes in the agricultural industry. We might volunteer at the local animal shelter or take in a rescue dog.

Would the change mean I'd have to stop killing cockroaches and ants? If they're in my home, not a chance. But I don't think either animal is in danger of extinction and I'd kill them quickly so as not to prolong any suffering. I'd feel bad if I thought they left behind dependent families, but I don't think that's the case. Admittedly, I have a hierarchy of animal life indicating I'm not ready to equate all animals with humanity. I recognize all beings have a right to live, just not in my house, please.

I believe changing the language of the principle will help us become more aware of the many privileges we allow for ourselves that oppress others. It will help me live up to a higher standard of respect for all life, even if I do so imperfectly. I prefer having an aspirational goal I can strive for rather than one that requires little of me or reinforces my existing preferences and prejudices.

When asked, I will vote my conscience in support of the change.

May you respond as your conscience directs you.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. Describe your feelings about (or reaction to) a significant encounter with a wild or tame animal.
2. How do your understandings of animals and their possible rights affect your decisions regarding food, clothing, pets, or other life-style choices? Share.
3. What is your greatest joy or concern over changing the UUA's First Principle from *person* to *being*, and would you vote for or against this change? Explain.