

“God’s Creatures Great and Small”

Richard Rohr

Who could ever express the deep affection Francis of Assisi bore for all things that belong to God? Or tell of the sweet tenderness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom, power and goodness of the Creator?

—Thomas of Celano

Francis of Assisi is known for his love for animals, but too often the stories become overly romanticized or even magical in their thinking. The truth of Francis’ respect for animals is far more profound than mere “birdbath Franciscanism” lets on. Everything was a mirror for Francis. What he saw in the natural world, in the sky, in animals, and even plants was a reflection of God’s glory. His first biographer, Thomas of Celano, writes about how Francis was constantly praising creatures for giving God glory just by their very existence. They could simply be and be themselves. Eventually, nature mirrored back the same message to Francis himself: he could just be and be himself in all of his freedom and joy and poverty.

British biologist Rupert Sheldrake invites us to a contemplative exercise in which we share a “mirroring” experience with the animal world so that we might have a glimpse of the reality that Francis lived throughout his life.

BE PRESENT WITH AN ANIMAL

If a cat is purring while you stroke it, be completely present to the stroking and the purring—rather than stroking distractedly while having a conversation or watching TV. The cat is present; become present with it.

Or listen to a bird singing. I live in England, and my favorite birdsong is that of blackbirds singing in the spring and early summer. I listen to their songs, which change every time they sing. Often I hear another blackbird respond: they interact with each other and reply to each other’s tunes and variations. They are present to each other. We can be present through listening. Wherever you live, you will be able to find birds singing. . . .

GET TO KNOW ANOTHER SPECIES

If you keep a cat, dog, horse, parrot, budgie, rabbit, hamster, ferret, lizard, goldfish, stick insect or another kind of animal, you are already getting to know another species. If you have, or have had, more than one cat, dog, horse, or other animal, you will also know that each animal is different. Each expresses its unique individuality within the context of its species’ instincts.

If you do not have a companion animal, or even if you do, you can get to know a wild species by observing individuals that live near you—like birds in your garden or in a nearby park—watching and listening to them, perhaps feeding them, relating to them throughout the year.

The better you know your chosen kind of animal, the more you will appreciate its way of being, its form of life. You will feel connected to a world much wider than your human concerns, and with which you share a common source. □

Adapted from Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditation. Used by permission.



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