

THE ANIMAL BLESSING

*"Dr. Dorian, do you believe animals talk?"
"I never heard one say anything," he replied.
"But that proves nothing. It is quite possible
that an animal has spoken civilly to me
and that I didn't catch the remark
because I wasn't paying attention."*

Charlotte's Web, E. B. White

B*athed in the* late autumn sunlight of Central Park, the woman sat cross-legged on the knoll, gently twisted like a soft New York pretzel. Her eyes surveyed the city's big expanse of recreational fields, tree-lined paths and wooden benches, all peppered with the sounds of people in play and private conversation. A long way from her home in Mt. Shasta, California, she was new to the many languages that wafted through the air. But she was not a novice to another kind of language that interlaced the buzz of the park, a language that went beyond the resonance of verbal words, but that no less communicated stories with rich images, thoughts and feelings.

As if on cue, two Airedales, their wiry tan and black coats recently washed, interrupted Sharon Callahan's contemplation as they strutted by with their human companions. As the frisky dogs sent a hey-aren't-we-having-fun message Sharon's way, she and her partner Purusha laughed. But the canines had more to say. Knowing the importance of reconnecting to nature, they wanted the woman who seemed so easily to tune into them to know that they were proud to be the catalyst for today's outing with their fellow city dwellers; they also wanted her to know they were just doing their jobs, for they took their service to their human friends to heart. As Sharon acknowledged their work, the boys sped off barking, headed toward some quick movements they'd eyed by a nearby tree.

As she closed her eyes and centered herself to meditate, other animals beckoned to this petite woman wrapped in the free-flowing purple top and soft black pants. The squirrels and birds, that so many New Yorkers care for with bread crumbs and peanuts, had something to add. Though they had no taste for the canine species' endless obsession for chasing, they did agree with the dogs in one way: they were glad to do their part in helping to bring people together to nurture life of all kinds, knowing that when people nurture others, they also nurture themselves. And since September 11, 2001, when the devastating collapse of the World Trade Center shook them all, that need was even greater than before.

Thanking them for their service, Sharon made a mental note to emphasize that in the homily today. She lay back on the sparsely grassed hillside and gazed into the pastel sky. In an hour she would be walking into a Manhattan church to give a homily and be an integral part of a special blessing. It would be another first for her: speaking to a large gathering in a structure that reminded her of another one she had walked away from years before. What a sense of humor the Universe had.

Though she'd grown up in a devout Irish Catholic home in San Francisco, she'd absconded from organized religion at the age of nine when, during a catechism class one afternoon after school, the priest stated (as if indeed it came straight from the Gospels), that not all of God's creations were equal in His sight. And though she'd be a teen before she followed her heart's decision to leave it all behind, she knew that the priest's words did not vibrate with what she felt, what she knew to be true: that some of our fellow beings are not only more than

what they appear to be, but that they also communicate, speaking in a language beyond the expected barks, neighs, meows and chirps. No strangers to the pull of emotions, they too had feelings, and would welcome a warm, heartfelt blessing as much as any person would delight in a grandmother's hug. As an animal communicator, she could attest to that. Could it really be that over four decades had skipped by since one of the smallest creatures in the animal kingdom first spoke directly to her?

Bill and Margaret Edwards climbed the steps of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City November 18, 2001, as was their custom every Sunday morning. Though what would follow later on in the afternoon at their church would not be so conventional. And that had both of them, as crusaders for the event, thrilled and a bit anxious. Not only would it be a first for the nearly 200-year-old church and its congregation, but it would also be especially so for the invited guests of honor, most who undoubtedly had never stepped beyond the sanctuary's threshold. Thank goodness, the smiling couple agreed in union, Sharon would be offering the homily at the Thanksgiving Blessing of the Animals, for the animals would feel at home with her.

As the afternoon special service neared, 14-year-old star athlete Jesse Mashburn stood at the church doors handing out programs for the blessings' service. How good was this, he thought, seeing people and their pets going to church together. Inside, his family and friends were stroking his animal companion to reassure the four-foot-long spotted ball python, aware that if the snake felt fear or tension, he'd ball up. But the reptile was content, wrapped around the arm of Jesse's sister. Jesse wondered if anyone else was sitting next to them. If so, not too close, he bet. Too bad some people don't understand that a snake is as true a friend as any dog or cat. And Willie was the sweetest animal he'd ever known.

Walking from her home just two blocks away from All Souls, church member Inez Miller escorted her best male friend, one who was half her age. Twenty-nine-year-old Petey preferred traveling with a soft cloth draped over his cage; the tropical Senegal parrot, with his gray head and tail, yellow vest and green body, was not a fan of wind, cool temperatures or too many people at once. As Jesse handed Mrs. Miller a program, she stepped inside and zeroed in on the first pew. Once seated, she let Petey out on her lap. Using some of his 50-word vocabulary, he talked

freely, as he looked around, with quick head movements, at the new scenery, checking out where his human companion goes when she tells him she's going to church.

Second-grader Emily Donato had heard that a snake would be at the animal blessing today, so she decided not to bring her four rodent animal companions. Not that she didn't like all animals. She did help organize a local animal lovers' club and was a junior park ranger at Marine Park Environment Center. She considered it her mission in life to rescue as many animals as came across her path, from the sparrow she carried on her shoe after saving him from the street cleaner, to talking the pet shop owner into eliminating live white mice from the snakes' diets. But today she was going to be in charge of one of Bill Edwards' cats, Shakespeare, while Bill sang and helped with the blessing. Emily also wanted to see that lady, the one that talks to the animals. She wondered if she was like Dr. Doolittle, who could speak every animal's language.

Jumping out of the car with Annie secure in her canine carrier, Elizabeth Teal did a one-eighty, stuck her head back inside and thanked her friend for the lift. As she took the program from Jesse, Liz quickly ducked inside the church, and scoured the area for her husband and seven-year-old son. Finding them, she sat down with the 10-pound spaniel and a big sigh of relief. She'd made it. Earlier she'd been an hour and a half away in Rockland County at a meeting on training response dogs. An animal behavior specialist and trainer, Liz offered educational and emotional support for both ends of the leash. And for the past two months, stacking up hours upon hours at ground zero, where once the colossal World Trade Center dominated, she and Annie assisted other animal therapy teams who dealt with the aftermath of the disaster, knowing that the need to be touched and listened to is much more easily accepted when it's offered by an animal. Opening the program, Liz smiled when she read the name of the woman who would be giving the homily.

It'd been awhile since she'd first met the West Coast woman at a Delta Society meeting. Though the meeting had been succinct, she'd come away feeling that the petite, soft-spoken and unassuming woman cared deeply about animals and what messages they gave us about ourselves. So having Sharon Callahan, internationally acclaimed animal communicator and founder of Anafflora Flower Essence Therapy for Animals, a woman so many in animal care, from veterinarians to sanctuary providers to animal

therapists respected, as the keynote speaker was apropos indeed as the church put on its first animal blessing.

Up in the choir loft, Bill Edwards surveyed the scene below. His gnawing concerns that this singular gathering of cats, hamsters, rabbits, mice, rats, dogs, bird and snake below in the pews would end up being as fragile as the glass animals in Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* were now thankfully shattered. Except for a couple of barks from two dogs in the back, the congregation of humans and animals seemed as peaceful and as natural a congregation as found at any Sunday service. His church's name—All Souls—seemed to be especially fitting for this inclusive gathering.

And more were still coming in for the blessing, including Margaret who'd returned home to bring 5 of the 40 cats who lived at her and her husband Bill's Feline Sanctuary, a loving shelter they had created for homeless cats. Handing the cats over to some children who didn't have animals of their own with them, including eight-year-old Emily, Margaret glanced up at Bill and gave him the thumbs up sign. For over a year, the couple had advocated a church recognition of the community's animal companions, from personal ones to those who serve as rescue and therapeutic animals. By June, All Souls got its ducks in a row and set on the November calendar A Thanksgiving Blessing of the Animals, not knowing then how relevant and healing the service would be once the events of September 11 etched their indelible mark on the city. With a wink and a smile, Bill nodded at Margaret, then turned to look at Mr. Socks, the animal companion of a close friend and fellow choir member, one of the few animals in the choir loft.

The big green-eyed and white-nosed tuxedo cat sat at the feet of Holly Drew. She was glad Mr. Socks was here. And he'd thrown her a perfect surprise: He'd settled in quite well as the choir practiced before the service, seemingly at home with the voices of so many humans in unison and the energy of so many other animals around him. Digging into her choir robe pocket, Holly felt for the picture of Woody. When she took Mr. Socks down to be blessed at the altar, she'd take the photo of her horse, a 17-year-old Morgan gelding, and his stable mate, Penney, who were five hours away at the family farm in Vermont. So bonded were the two horses that even Holly, an experienced equestrian who'd grown up with horses, was impressed with their intense attachment. She planned to show the photograph to Sharon Callahan, the woman who

would be blessing Mr. Socks. Bill, who had utilized the services of the animal intuitive, as well as her flower essences for treating emotional imbalances in animals, spoke highly of this woman. Over and over he'd said her communication with his cats had resulted in authentic and compassionate help for the animals and him. But Holly was a natural skeptic and although she knew Sharon worked with vets and other animal care professionals around the country and the world, she would wait before casting her vote with Bill's.

With the last stragglers in, Jesse closed the doors and headed toward Willie. By the time he was settled and the brown-and-black-spotted ball python was at ease draped around his neck, the service in the white interior of the classical revival church was already moving along. Looking around the auditorium, he liked the idea of this whole thing. It was a cool way for people to come together and show what they had in common: their love for their animal companions. The way Jesse looked at it, when people treated animals nicely, they treated people nicely, too. And with so many people he knew still stressed out about 9/11, that was a good thing. At the podium, a diminutive woman rose to speak. This was the animal intuitive he'd heard about. As he petted Willie, he gave Sharon Callahan his full attention.

Moved by the beauty of the scene before her, Sharon looked out at the sanctuary with moist eyes. As a child, this is how she'd envisioned church: a beautiful, spiritual place where all God's creatures joined together. The congregation, dotted with home-based and serviced-based animals, along with their human companions, emitted the high vibration of oneness and love. Thanking God for the peace she felt in church again, Sharon also thanked the Universe for this harmonious place, where humans and animals treated one another with sacred respect and love.

Though her focus was on her presentation and not on communicating with the individual animals, a few had dropped in to speak. The snake said he was so proud to be here and liked being touched by everyone; he felt he was performing a sacred service to his species in showing people snakes don't feel icky and that they are as loving as any animal. Annie the dog, a veteran of animal-assisted therapy, threw in a reminder to not forget those animals out there helping people in crisis situations. Jumping from his human companion's lap to the woman's shoulder, a spirited parrot relayed to her that he was thinking of calling out "here

kitty” like he does at home, but he figured he’d keep the feline teasing down to a minimum. He was having fun just being with everyone and showing off his handsome feathers anyway. She chuckled at that one. Just as with humans, there was always a comedian in the place.

Before Sharon spoke, she noticed a young girl holding and stroking a cat from head to tail. The cat’s delight reminded her not only of the smiling Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, but also of Lily, her own feline buddy back at home. Smiling, Sharon began the homily.

“When we think of service animals, we often think of guide dogs, search and rescue dogs and other animals that are trained to assist human beings, but it is my feeling that all animals perform tremendous acts of service. I believe that animals are here on earth as a sacred ministry. According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, to minister means to offer comfort, to aid and to tend to the needs of others. To any sensitive person, the ministry of domestic animals can be observed in the ways in which their lives complement and support our own. In addition to functioning as our companions and protectors, domestic animals live as examples of universal virtues that we seek to perfect within ourselves: beauty, humility, sacrifice, service, devotion, patience and unconditional love, just to name a few. Wild animals, simply by virtue of their presence in the world, have the ability to uplift and transform the human spirit, thus being service to the blossoming of the human soul. . . . Animals also serve one another.”

Offering examples of animal altruism and love, Sharon delivered authentic stories that had ears of all shapes listening. Some in the audience even offered an amen, as more than once her words were underscored by a canine bark.

With her picture of Woody and Penney in hand and Mr. Socks in tow, Holly led the procession down to the altar where Sharon, along with Bill, the Reverends Forrester Church and Jan Carlson-Bull, stood ready to pay tribute to the individual animals. When Holly neared Sharon, she felt a big presence from this tiny, alabaster-skinned woman whose eyes sparkled with gentle compassion. As Sharon took the photograph of the two horses and focused on the images, she seemed to forget her surroundings for a millisecond and gently merged with the animals facing her in the picture. Looking up from the photo at Holly, she stated with a Mona Lisa smile, “Oh, my, they really, truly love each other, don’t they? How wonderful.”

Taken aback and greatly moved that this woman picked up something so fundamental about Woody and Penney, Holly almost forgot to present Mr. Socks. As she did, Sharon touched the cat and offered a blessing for all four of them. Aware of the many behind her, Holly scooted away knowing that she had been blessed in more ways than one.

Liz with Annie, Emily with Shakespeare, Jesse with Willie and Inez, accompanying Petey, made their way down the aisle to the front of the church. Like the others, they came forward with their animal companions to receive blessings for a life full of joy, appreciation and love.

Still swathed in the electric, yet soothing energy she felt being around Sharon, Holly loaded Mr. Socks in the cab. Calm and content, the cat had experienced his first church service, his first blessing. Holly was eager to be with Woody to see how he and Penny were after receiving their blessings from this spiritually intuitive woman. As the cab slipped into traffic, Holly knew she wanted to know more. Just who *was* this singular being? What messages from our animal partners did she have for us all?



LANI PHILIPS

Sharon Callahan and puppy Isabella communicate.