Is God Talking to You Through Your Dog?

There is nothing like having a pet to reveal the truth of who you are. Listen to this poem by Robert Wrigley, “Do You Love Me?”:

She's twelve and she's asking the dog,  
who does, but who speaks  
in tongues, whose feints and gyrations  
are themselves parts of speech.

They're on the back porch  
and I don't really mean to be taking this in  
but once I've heard I can't stop listening. Again  
and again she asks, and the good dog

sits and wiggles, leaps and licks.  
Imagine never asking. Imagine why:  
so sure you wouldn't dare, or couldn't care  
less. I wonder if the dog's guileless brown eyes

can lie, if the perfect canine lack of abstractions  
might not be a bit like the picture books  
she "read" as a child, before her parents' lips  
shaped the daily miracle of speech

and kisses, and the words were not lead  
and weighed only air, and did not mean  
so meanly. “Do you love me?” she says  
and says, until the dog, sensing perhaps

its own awful speechlessness, tries to bolt,  
but she holds it by the collar and will not  
let go, until, having come closer,  
I hear the rest of it. I hear it all.

She's got the dog's furry jowls in her hands,  
she's speaking precisely  
into its laid-back, quivering ears:  
"Say it," she hisses, "say it to me."

Most of us have learned to hide the raw parts of our humanity better than a twelve year old, but we all long to be loved unconditionally, generously, endlessly. Isn't that what we do here every Sunday? We ransack scripture, grab the church by the face, confess our sin and say, “All right, tell me now, tell me that you love me,” eager for the voice of our still-speaking God, desperate to hear that we're loved?
There is nothing like having a pet to reveal the truth of who you are. Here’s a confession: sometimes, when I’m feeling bad about myself or I’ve had a hard day at work I’ll come home and snap at our kids. I’m sure none of you have ever done this. The thing that really sets me off is towels on a bedroom floor. Come on! It takes less effort to hang a towel up than it does to drop it. That’s my standard line, usually followed by an irate speech about messiness and bad habits bleeding out of a messy bedroom and into the rest of your life. I get all worked up.

Then I walk to my bedroom. There’s often a towel on the floor. There’s always a mess. Who am I really mad at? Whose bad habits really vex me? My own of course. It’s so easy to take the parts of yourself you loathe, put them on someone else and then get all upset at that person.

But, you can’t do it with a dog. I’ve tried. And then I immediately realize, “What kind of lunatic gets into projective identification with a dog? What kind of creep takes his anger out on a dog?” The same kind of creep who takes his anger out on other people.

Having a pet can make you a better person. My mother gets at this with a poem she wrote years ago. It’s called “The Meaning of Life.”

There is a moment just before
a dog vomits when its stomach
heaves dry, pumping what’s deep
inside the belly to the mouth.
If you are fast you can grab
her by the collar and shove her
out the door, avoid the slimy bile,
hunks of half chewed food
from landing on the floor.
You must be quick, decisive,
controlled, and if you miss
the cue and the dog erupts
en route, you must forgive
her quickly and give yourself
to scrubbing up the mess.

Most of what I have learned
in life leads back to this.

Most of what I have learned in life leads back to this: “You must forgive her quickly and give yourself to scrubbing up the mess.”

Last Saturday I saw a blue heron on North Pond. He was standing on a half-submerged log in the fetid water, stretching on one leg.
Up close a heron looks like a piece of modernist art. It's barely representational, all angles, leg, wing, torso, neck. Sleek, elegant. Can a bird be debonair?

I started walking again and I nearly bumped into a young man with a selfie stick, admiring himself from just the right angle. I looked past him. And I saw a young woman stretching her arm out, trying to get both the skyline and her face in the frame. All around me, people were taking selfies, considering their own profiles.

Meanwhile, the most beautiful creature in the park was too busy being himself to worry about his looks. Indeed, the most remarkable thing about that heron's beauty is that he wasn't aware of it.

Animals have an unconscious grandeur about them. DH Lawrence gets at this with his little poem, “Lizard.”

A lizard ran out on a rock and looked up, listening no doubt to the sounding of the spheres.
And what a dandy fellow!
the right toss of a chin for you and a swirl of a tail!
If men were as much men as lizards are lizards they'd be worth looking at.

He's saying that our self-consciousness limits us. That our self-awareness hurts us, that we ought to strive to be more...creaturely.

Does killing a cow have more in common with murder or with chopping down a tree? Don't blame me for that unsettling question. It comes from Karl Barth. And it serves a purpose. We're like cows. Or dogs. We are creatures.

We spend a good deal of time and energy denying our creatureliness. But there are great gifts in it. If humans were human as much as that heron is a heron I bet we'd be happier.

So what do animals know that we don't know?

Job says that dogs and cats and goldfish and gerbils know that without God, they wouldn't exist. They just get it. Indeed, their awareness of their own dependence is what lets them be themselves.

Meanwhile, from an early age we've been told that we're self-made. We're always forgetting that we're creatures. But to be a creature is to have a creator!

When we lose track of the fact that God made us, we lose track of the fact that love made us. And as a result life isn't a loving gift. Instead it becomes pinched, empty, meaningless. And we become petty, resentful, cynical.
I got poison ivy on the second day of my family’s summer vacation. Our kids were bickering. It started to rain. I stepped barefoot on a Lego. Then I got two phone calls crowing about missed payments. Credit cards. They didn’t say it, but they said it, “You’ll never get your act together.”

None of this surprised me. The rain kept coming. What was I supposed to do? Play a game of badminton? Mix a gin and tonic? I’d sooner wear a polo shirt with a popped collar. Vacation is for suckers. That’s how I felt.

I felt bitter. And my bitterness was just delicious! You know how good it tastes. I let it sit on my tongue. I savored it. I should have stayed at work. We should have stayed in the city. Nothing matters anyhow. I fumed. Next to me, the dog whined. Then she barked.

I opened the door. Zeus bolted. She’s a city dog. Adopted from a shelter, tethered to a leash, trapped by a fence. Not this time. She was out of sight before I realized she was gone.

You may have seen our family dog. She’s, well, she’s not exactly beautiful. She’s a pit bull mix, very gentle, but if she came running at you across a country field, it might freak you out. And she can be short-tempered with other dogs.

Kelli said, “We better go after her.” I said, “She’ll come back. What’s the worst that could happen?” Kelli said, “She could kill somebody’s Labradoodle.”

I jumped on my bike. There was a grass road behind the house. The rain stopped. The sun broke. The sky became all violet light just as the road became an orchard. I flew downhill, tight between two rows of cherry trees. The fruit was a blur of red. The trees a blur of green. And then I saw our dog, a blur of white and brown, her gigantic tongue rolling out of her gigantic jaws and I swear to God, she was grinning. She was ecstatic. But also deeply content. She was fully herself, fully a creature, wholly unleashed.

And here’s what she knew. God made us to be alive, to feel good. To feel joy. The moment we forget that we are creatures is the moment we lose sight of this.

The row of cherry trees we were in seemed endless. I pumped my bike pedals, flying alongside our joyful dog. My lungs were burning. It felt so good. I looked at Zeus and I knew she felt it too. We were fused, two creatures on the run. Is it too much to say I climbed inside my dog’s mind and found God there? Probably, but in that moment when we were just two creatures on the run I felt what she feels, I felt like God’s handiwork. I felt like a creature, utterly dependent on the love that made me.

This made all my bitterness taste foul. I hit the brakes. I spit it out. The dog stopped next to me panting joyfully. I grabbed a cherry from a tree and ate it. I mourned my own overwrought, over thought absurdity. I laughed out loud.

Sermon by Matt Fitzgerald: **Sunday, October 23, 2016**
We can insist we are self-made. The world will affirm that view. We can decide existence is a problem not a gift. There's plenty of evidence. We can confuse cynicism for wisdom. We'll get plenty of agreement. But God gives us life and She wants our joy. And She will not leave us alone. So we get the loveliness of fruit trees, whether we want it or not. We get the glee of a dog on the run whether we want it or not. We get the fact that we are God’s utterly dependent creatures whether we believe it or not. Thank God. Amen.

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