

A Blessing for the Animals: Called to Meddle
Unitarian Universalist Church of Winchendon
Reverend Marguerite Sheehan October 24, 2010

“Thank you for the beast so tall. Thank you for the creatures small.
Thank you for all things that live. Thank you, God, for all you give.”
Our prayer today was short and simple, even sweet sounding. Who of us
would ever question the idea that human beings should not only give
thanks for the tall and small animals of the earth and sea and sky, but
even bless them as we just did this morning? Who would ever think that
caring about animals was something radical? Doesn’t everyone believe
that animals have the right to be cared for?

Well, as our representative from Ahimsa Haven would likely attest,
caring for animals, and ahimsa, the Hindu word for “doing no harm” is
not a universal value and has not always been practiced. What we are
doing today, both blessing of our animal friends and taking a collection
to support the work of Ahimsa Haven is spiritual work. Spiritual work
means work that attends to the needs of all creatures to be respected,
cared for, and valued as part of the interdependent web of existence. Not
just human creatures and not just our beloved pets, but all creatures great
and small. And so we pray “Thank you for all things that live. Thank
you God for all you give.” Life is a gift that we humans are called to
respect and protect.

Our Unitarian Universalist principles are book ended with two principles that speak to this value. The last, which maybe should be the first, is “We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” And the first, which might be more humbly expressed as the last says “We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And so it makes sense that we Unitarian Universalists would bless not only every person but every animal also, or as our Buddhist brothers and sisters might say, every sentient being.

It was not always so. Our reading today tells different story set in April 1866. This story is strangely connected to our Unitarian Universalist faith and in some way to our own church. Look about you at this beautiful church sanctuary and think with me for a moment about what was happening in the United States right around the time that this sanctuary was dedicated in 1866 – 124 years ago.

In 1865, one year before our church was dedicated; the Civil War had just ended. Slavery, once practiced both in the American South and the North including Massachusetts and our neighbor state New Hampshire, was finally abolished. In 1886, the same year that our church was dedicated, the Statue of Liberty that edifice which has become a national symbol of the plight of the immigrants, was officially opened. This was

a time in our country when social issues were hotly debated and hard won – not unlike our times.

The Church of the Unity was dedicated in such a time. The men and women who fought for the abolition of slavery, for temperance, for women's right to vote, against child labor and for sanitary laws to prevent the spread of disease were not quiet passive people. They were people of passion and many of them were inspired by their religious teachings. Many of them were Unitarians and Universalists. And one of those Unitarians, in 1866 began a crusade that would lead us to this Animal Blessing service today.

Henry Bergh, the founder of the American Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was a Unitarian from New York City. His minister was the Reverend Henry Bellows, the minister of the church that is now called All Souls Church in New York City. Bellows preached a strong socially liberal Unitarian Christian message that Henry Bergh would have heard and that at a young age would have stirred his mind and heart. It was a message that took seriously the teachings of Jesus to care for the poor, the sick, the grieving, the unjustly imprisoned, and the sick of heart and soul. When Bergh heard this message from his pastor he took it seriously.

Bergh said “To plant or revive the principle of mercy in the human heart would be a triumph greater than the building of the Great Pacific Railroad.” And that is what he set about doing – planting and reviving the principle of mercy in the human heart, in the mid 1880’s when not only that human beings were sold as chattel, and children were treated like property, but animals were routinely beaten, starved, set to fight against each other and left to die when they were no longer useful. It was animals, primarily horses that brought Henry Bergh face to face with the kind of injustice that he had learned in his Unitarian church, to despise.

Bergh was a man of wealth and influence. He could have turned away from animal abuse and stayed in his ivory tower. All the pictures I have seen of him show him walking about in a fancy suit, a top hat and carrying a gold tip cane. He could have turned away from the scenes both in Russia where he was a diplomat and back home in New York, scenes of carriage drivers beating their horses, but instead he took these scenes into his heart and his mind and said “I’ve found a way to utilize my gold lace.” He had found his mission as an animal advocate.

Henry Bergh was not quiet or passive and he was not easily discouraged. He saw the abuse of animals as being a religious, moral and ethical travesty. “This is a matter purely of conscience. It has no perplexing side issues..it is a moral question in all its aspects...It is a solemn recognition

of that greatest attribute of the Almighty Ruler of the Universe, mercy, which if suspended in our case but for a single instant would overcome and destroy us.” Animal abuse called for mercy and Bergh was determined to bring mercy to animals.

No Henry Bergh was not quiet or passive. He was unrelenting as he worked with politicians to make laws to protect animals. As our reading said, he personally patrolled the streets of New York stopping people from hurting animals, calling in the police to arrest them, and bringing them to trial. He was called The Great Meddler. That name was not a name of honor but of a rebuke. Because that is what he was doing; “meddling” in the business of the merchants, the ordinary people, the circus owners, and every one else he saw abusing animals. He would not keep to his own business when he saw cruelty. He meddled.

Meddling was what all those reformers were doing. Meddling was what their teacher Jesus did when he went into the temple and turned over the sales tables, and when he purposely invited himself to the houses of tax collectors, or drank from the cup of water offered by an adulteress – meddling, getting into someone else’s business, righting a wrong that could have been ignored.

Bergh was a Great Meddler and today we honor his memory and take on his legacy. Yes there is a time to stand back, to not judge behavior, to turn away from the business of our neighbors. But there are also times that it is crucial for all us of to meddle. Meddling does not win friends, it does not win medals, but it does, sometimes, make a difference in the lives of people, animals, and this very planet.

“Henry Bergh seemed to be everywhere, fearlessly raiding the dog and rat pits and cocking mains, and working boldly in the streets. He made his first arrest when he sighted a butcher named Mans transporting live calves roped tightly together and stacked up like cordwood (sometimes the animals’ heads hung out over the sides of transport carts and were crushed against passing vehicles or were ground against the wheels of their own cart). Bergh chased the cart all the way from Broadway to the Williamsburg Ferry and got a conviction.” Henry Bergh was a meddler.

And not only did he meddle in the affairs of people and their animals, he also meddled in the affairs of people with their children. When Bergh said that “mercy to animals means mercy to mankind” he meant it. A Methodist missionary worker told him about the suffering of a young girl who had endured severe physical and mental abuse in her foster home. Bergh made a radical case at this time that the child, Mary Ellen Wilson, was a “human citizen” and deserved court protection. He got her

removed from the foster home in New York City and along with Eldridge Gerry, in 1875, he co-founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. 10 years after legislation to protect animals, Bergh meddled in the business of foster care and children gained some of the same protections.

Meddling is spiritual work. It is not work to entertain lightly. It is not work to engage without solid thinking, prayer, strength, and a commitment to risk losing your reputation and maybe even losing your life. It is the work of Ahimsa Haven, and it is our work as people of faith. And when we meddle we need to be aware that people may meddle with us when we do not live up to our faith, our values and our principles. We too may be called to task and encouraged to look within at who we are and what we are doing. Are we generous? Are we just? Do we love? Are we reaching out? Are we living up to the dreams of the radical reformers who started churches like ours and who, like Henry Bergh, challenged the world?

Today, in 2010, let us bless the animals and bless the children. Bless the people in this town of Winchendon, this state of Massachusetts, this country of the United States, this planet earth. Bless us each and every one and help us to know when to stand back and when to step up and meddle. Thank you Henry and thank you Ahimsa for bringing us to our

senses and helping us put our hands and hearts to reduce the suffering of all living beings. May we harm no one and may we help many. Amen.

Sources for Quotes: - The Great Meddler by Gerald Carson from AmericanHeritage.com