All God’s Living Creatures: What We Can Learn from Animals

Proverbs 30: 24-31; Job 12:7-10

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On May 25, 2000, my former track coach at Grimsley High School, Bob Sawyer (now retired), drove to the corner of Starmount and East Kemp in the Hamilton Lakes neighborhood to take a walk with his ninety-year old mother.

There is a small parking area at that corner and this is a wonderful place to take some exercise through the forest along a dirt path, forming a mile and a half loop. A creek runs through the center of the loop, handling the overflow of Lake Hamilton above the dam at East Keeling Road.

As Bob Sawyer and his mother pulled in to park their car, they noticed something very peculiar. Several large snapping turtles were crawling out of the creek bed and moving at a rapid pace (though a turtle’s pace) toward higher ground.

Odd but what could it mean? About thirty minutes into their walk the clear blue skies turned black and the winds picked up. Before they could even think about turning back toward the car, the wind was at almost hurricane force and the rain came down heavy. Bob thought about getting into the creek bed as a shelter from the wind but instead they clung to a tree so the wind wouldn’t blow them over. Around them all through the park giant oaks, maple, gums, sycamores, beeches, and pines came crashing down. They could easily have been crushed to death. Had they hunkered down in the creek bed, they would surely have perished as a wall of water came charging downstream from the heavy rain and as overflow from the lake above them.

The storm was quickly over and Bob and his mother survived. It was very difficult getting back to their car with all the trees down. Sirens were going off all over town. The city was hit hard – a freak straight line windstorm, almost as bad as a tornado. As he sat in his car shaken and grateful to be alive, my old track coach turned to his mother and said, “Those turtles knew it was coming. Those turtles we saw when we first pulled in. They had a thirty minute warning somehow and were seeking cover.” Later Bob would go back to the spot where they hung on for dear life and carved into the magnificent beech tree that saved their lives, “May 25, 2000. The Big Storm.”

God Almighty has given all his creatures (including humans) amazing talents, capacities, gifts. Most of the talents are given to us so we can survive. But some seem for the pure pleasure of it, the sport of it, as if God is showing off, expressing creativity, trying out new ideas. The Arctic tern can fly twenty-five thousand miles from the Arctic to the Antarctic and find her way back to where she was hatched, using magnetic fields and remembered landmarks.
The salmon can swim two thousand miles in the ocean and then swim back to the very stream where she was born, often a tiny creek no bigger than the little branch that runs through Fisher Park across the street from us.

The Monarch butterfly can travel from the eastern United States to a particular hillside in Michoacán, Mexico (Kate and I have been there – we have seen them) through four generations. One starts in New York and then he dies in North Carolina and a newborn keeps going to Alabama and on until they make it to Mexico twenty-five-hundred miles away. Oddly, once they arrive in Mexico they go to the very same trees their descendants used and only hibernate on the Oyamel fir tree.

Elephant herds can communicate with other elephant herds up to twelve miles away using low frequency, deep rumbling sounds emitted from the base of their trunks. We can see the trunk vibrate, but we cannot hear it. The frequency is too low for our ears. A man named Lawrence Anthony owned a farm in South Africa and devoted his life to saving wild elephants. Over the years he developed amazing relationships with these animals.

When he died in 2012, elephants from all over the vast bush somehow knew he had died. Some had not seen him in over a year. An elephant funeral march began – a march that lasted for twelve hours – as these giant creatures traveled many miles to stand beside his home and pay their respects. They stayed for two days and then left and went back into the bush.

A cat who lived in a Rhode Island nursing home somehow knew when someone in the nursing home was about to die. About an hour before death, the cat would jump onto the dying person’s bed and lie there quietly until death arrived. This happened over fifty times.

Watch a video of a cuttlefish changing forms to hide himself and keep from getting eaten. You just won’t believe a creature could do such a thing. It makes a chameleon’s ability to change colors look like nothing special at all.

We have a lot we can learn from animals and nature. A whole lot. We aren’t paying attention like we should. Humans have been on the planet for quite a while, but we are slow learners – at least slow to learn what God wants us to learn from animals. Not everything of course. I don’t want to romanticize. There are some animal traits that are repulsive, immoral (to our standards anyway) and cruel.

Chickens in a barnyard will sometimes gang up on a weak, isolated chicken and peck it to death. Kids bullying on a playground do something similar. We have already learned these animal traits, and I surely wish we hadn’t.

I’m thinking about more spiritual, altruistic traits. Could we, for example, learn a few things about grieving, or compassion, or paying our respects for the dead from some animals?
A baby chimpanzee accidentally fell from a tree and died. A nature researcher watched the chimps tenderly pick up the baby and pass it from one to another through the trees and even over to the trees of a neighboring tribe of chimps they sometimes fought, until all had touched the little one and said goodbye.

All of us struggle to know what to do or say to a friend who is dying or when their spouse or children or parents die, but really all we need to do is just be there quietly – like the elephants gathered outside Lawrence Anthony’s house or the cat on the bed at the nursing home.

If a turtle can tell a storm is coming and have enough common sense to get out of the creek and seek higher ground, why can’t we be more attentive and wise to avoid oncoming disasters?

Perhaps the turtle has been given by God a special eardrum that detects barometric pressure changes and therefore knows in advance when a storm is coming. But surely God has given us natural capacities we can cultivate, develop, and improve that will keep us from war and ecological ruin and a thousand other shameful tragedies, and stupidities we humans inflict upon ourselves.

Why do we seem doomed to make the same errors over and over, heaping misery upon ourselves when animals seem to avoid them? The Bible says we have sinned (and we have and we do) – that we are by nature flawed and that healing our flawed nature comes only through God. But even as flawed, failing creatures, I do not want to give up hope that we can still learn a few things and make some improvement. Surely the Almighty One has given us clues, signs, wonders, examples that can divert us from ruin. The Bible is full of these directives but so is the natural world. Albert Schweitzer said, “Man has lost his ability to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth.”

I don’t want to believe that. Maybe paying closer attention to how animals live can help us out some. I know God is always there to help us. We just need to pay closer attention to the truth God has put before our eyes. Wouldn’t most of us be happier learning a few things from dogs – who seem to have a great ability to accept us for who we are? To love us and desire our company even when we are boring and obnoxious. Dogs pick up on our moods and adapt to how we are.

When my daughter Emily is sick her little yorki poo, Bailey, will quietly, patiently stay in bed with her all day and defers his own needs and wishes to her needs and wishes.

I know we can’t live like animals live, but we can perhaps spend a little more time doing what they do. When I see the squirrels chasing each other around the trees in my backyard, going round and round on the trunks of the trees, I sometimes think, “I need to play more.” Or think but do not say, “A game of chase, anyone?” Children don’t really need to go to Disney World to have fun. A game of chase and a good tickle and a big cardboard box is even better. Currently our family is playing a game of hitting plastic golf balls into a small blue plastic baby pool with
nine irons and pitching wedges from about twenty yards away. It’s a little rednecky, but we like it and actually it is as fun as real golf and almost as challenging and much, much, cheaper. It’s something I learned from the squirrels – sort of.

I like watching the hawks and other birds just gliding around up in the sky. Yes, sometimes they are hunting but sometimes they are just having fun. Just soaring around for the heck of it.

Animals are always true to their natures. They can’t help it. But we have violated our natures. For example, it seems perfectly clear that humans are designed by God to stay on the move – to walk, run, dig, pull, push, bend, climb, swim – keep that body moving! Our capacity to run long distances is in fact so good that we can literally run down deer until they collapse in exhaustion. The Kalahari bushmen in Africa still hunt this way today. And yet we have designed jobs and lifestyles that require very little movement at all. This goes against our nature, and we are paying the cost with all kinds of health problems – physical and mental health. We eat food that is not the natural food God gave us to eat. It is in fact unnatural food and we have a worldwide problem with obesity and diabetes and heart disease.

Animals seem to spend a lot of time just watching silently. They also sleep a lot more than we do and most of us could use more sleep. Maybe if we spent more time in quiet and silence like animals we would begin to figure out more things.

What if God has given us amazing abilities that we have not yet discovered? And what if one of the reasons we haven’t discovered them is because we are not quiet enough, just listening, waiting, watching – instead of always chattering and being busy bodies and telling people what to do. What if these as yet undiscovered capacities are just as amazing as a salmon spawning in the stream where it was born or an elephant who knows a friend has died without receiving a phone call or email? Capacities that allow us to live better, more like God wants us to live, more peacefully and joyfully and letting the days own worries and pleasures be sufficient for the day.

Perhaps we can be more fully human, more in the likeness of God (as the book of Genesis tells us) by becoming in some select ways more like the animals – who are after all, all God’s creatures with whom we share this astonishing and beautiful creation.

As the book of Job says,

\textit{\textbf{Even birds and animals have much they could teach you. Ask the creatures of earth and sea for their wisdom. All of them know that the Lord’s hand made them. It is the Almighty who makes possible the lives of his creatures. Everyone’s life is in God’s power.}}

Job 12: 7-10