

“Make Me a Good Animal Today”

Our language has a lot of animal-human similes. Brave as lion – hungry as a horse. But did you ever notice how often they’re used as degrading terms? Like, What a heifer. Or mean as a snake. Men are pigs. A bitch is just a female dog – and I’ve never met one I didn’t like.

It’s a disturbing part of our culture that looks to create distance between ourselves and other animals. A culture that condemns any type of “animal nature” as shameful or disgusting.

We’ve built a society that exempts us from the natural order; set apart by God as landlords of the Garden of Eden. We alone have been given, “dominion over all the animals on the earth.”

But humans are part of the animal kingdom too. Classified as mammals, in the order of Primates; homo sapiens are characterized by our large, complex brains enabling the development of advanced tools, culture and language. Supposedly, humans are the smartest animals on Earth – I’m not so sure.

Even with thousands of years of evolution we’re still hard-wired for survival. Our monkey mind, that ancient part of our brain – relatively unchanged – still manages our emotions and our drives. We may dress up these baser instincts with intellectual rigor, but we still behave like (well) animals. We are creatures of cravings.

We used our big brains to construct elaborate stories that allow us to pretend we are what we are not. We find ourselves addicted to, and driven by, tools like social media: Facebook, and Instagram, Pinterest and SnapChat. Distractions that have us all spun up in “wants” that do no earthly good. They chew up our time and twist our minds till we’re left feeling overwhelmed ... and unsatisfied. Or missing out. And wanting more.

I’m not immune. I’ve wasted untold hours wanting what I thought others had. Living in NYC, as I did for more than 20 years, it’s easy to get sucked into that sickening spiral – focused not on what you have but what you lack. That amazing vacation, that wonderful relationship. That fancy new house or horse. I’ve lost good friends who went down that rabbit hole, never to return.

So what does it mean to be human? I believe it means we are part of this world. I agree, as well, with scholars who say, God, having given us more, also expects a greater duty of care. We are responsible to serve as good stewards over God’s creations. To look after all other living things. To be good animals. Because we know better. Our track record so far isn’t great. We’ve contaminated our earth. We are reckless with our future. “Doomed is the creature that fouls its own nest.”

To be human is to ask yourself the hard question: “Not, what do I want, but what do I really need?”

I am blessed to live in a little slice of paradise. From my front porch, if I am still, I can watch animals all around me, going about their daily lives. Horses, deer, foxes, rabbits, chipmunks – even a wayward woodchuck. These ‘lowly’ creatures, whose names we bandy about as insults, behave in ways I admire.

Good animals never lie. They do not cheat or steal or complain. They are cooperative. They take only what they need. They do what feels right in the moment. They play with abandon. They nap often. They enjoy a good scratch. They are content. What animals understand -- which I fear we do not -- is that when you go outside there is sunshine enough for everyone. They live from a place of abundance.

I still struggle – and so I remind myself every day: everything I need I already have.

But I will confess – I do still have a few “wants.”

I want to live without longing. I want to make the most of every minute. I want to revel in the present as if it were just that – a present. A gift, given to me by God.

And that’s why I wake up every day and pray, “Lord, let me be a good animal today.”

Amen.