News
EarthBeat



A tile in Assisi, Italy, depicts St. Francis and the wolf of Gubbio. (Wikimedia Commons/Zorro2212)

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Last winter Hobette, my cat, died from kidney failure.

Hobette first came to the door one brutal winter day 16 years ago, a stray shivering, skinny and hungry for food and love. "We need to take him in," my wife said.

"Absolutely," I said.

The justification in our compassion for Hobette lies, I suppose, in the belief that the cat, like us, experienced pain and suffering. We did not look at him as a bicycle or a shovel left outside.

It was the right — and only — decision.

Years ago, St. Francis of Assisi helped me to understand the souls of animals, as his soul was strengthened by his love of animals.

The patron saint of peace, St. Francis had a gentle, guileless nature that reflected a vision in which humans and animals would live in loving harmony. He wrote: "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy."

St. Francis provided valid reasons to see a self and a soul behind the eyes of animals. Historians provided the documentation, relating the story of the man-eating wolf of Gubbio.

The wolf for many years terrorized the citizens of the Italian city of Gubbio with predatory attacks on humans and other animals. Recognizing that the wolf's ways had sprung from hunger, St. Francis communicated to the wolf that the townspeople would provide food for him as long as he lived if, in turn, he would agree not to harm another human or animal. Historians are in agreement that the wolf bowed his head in acceptance of the saint's offer, and for the rest of his life the wolf respected the covenant, going from house to house every day to be fed by the townspeople until he died.

More and more, humans are renegotiating their relationship with animals, understanding that they are connected to the interrelatedness of all life. Indeed, the furred, feathered and finned come from God.

Animals are teachers, messengers and reflections in a physical form of divine principles. To neglect the importance of our relationships with animals is to neglect

the exigent needs of humans: Can the underprivileged be educated, the hungry fed, the poor clothed, the homeless given shelter, the lonely befriended, neighbors welcomed, or different cultures understood if we look at our relationships with animals as machines, as Descartes did?

More and more humans, too, are realizing their links to animals in terms of communication, intelligence and emotional life — that indeed animals possess higher mental acuities and capabilities, that they are able to feel pain, grief, joy, anger, that they only differ in degree from us, not in kind.

Even contemporary scholarship by ethologists, ecologists and theologians supports St. Francis' conviction that there is a self behind the animal's eyes by demonstrating that dolphins communicate in ultrasonic sounds far above human range; wolves are able to formulate complex strategies for hunting caribou and then assign roles in the hunt (lead wolves often lose their authority when they make decisions that do not have the consensus or approval of the pack); insects are able to build elaborate shelters and organize labyrinth societies with knowledge that is genetically acquired.

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These acknowledgements are making humans more sensitive and compassionate in two ways: We are giving animals their rightful place in creation, and we are seeing ourselves not as the center of everything but as one species given special responsibility in shepherding and caring for other living things.

My wife and I cared for Hobette for 16 years. It was an extremely happy 16 years. I shaped a companion bond with Hobette that transcended relationships with humans. When I was writing in my office Hobette would leap onto my desk and sit next to me. When I was eating, he hovered by my chair, hoping to get a morsel. When I was reading in bed he jumped up and snuggled next to me.

When I came home, he would be perched on the top of the sofa in the living room, looking out the big bay window for me. And once he saw me (he knew my car), he scampered down the stairs to greet me, and knowing I would check the answering machine, followed me into my office, hopped onto the desk and nuzzled my arm.

Yes, Hobette reawakened the child in me, that innocence that sometimes gets lost — or at least misplaced — in becoming an adult.

But even more, whenever he was around me, I never needed Euclidean proof to conclude that there was a self and a soul behind Hobette's eyes. I was certain he was able to communicate, express sentiments, and feel pain, joy, grief and anger.

It is no sin to admit that we have sometimes been negligent in viewing and treating animals as more than mere property or pets. The sin is not to admit it.

[B.G Kelley is a widely published writer who has edited the AV Magazine, an international magazine on animal rights.]

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