

To Have a Pet is to be a Mystic
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It is 14th century England -the time of the Black Plague which knows no bounds nor plays favorites. Fear is everywhere. In the small rural village of Norwich lives a young woman named Julian. All around her, the church permeates life. Her response to her faith is to become an “ anchoress ”. That’s not a nun, but person called to a solitary life, yet still connected to the world. Julian connects through three windows in her small cell - one to the church for communion, another for her meals, and the third is open to the street so people can talk to her. She is an “ anchor ” of God’s Light in the midst of a dark time. Julian never leaves her cell except to go into an attached high-walled garden. However, someone else lives in that cell with her: a cat. Intended to handle the rat population, but, to my cat-loving mind, her cat is a holy companion. I can imagine the furry-four legger curling up on Julian’s homespun-covered lap as she meditated, imaged God and reality as an acorn, prayed and counseled others.

It is Italy a century earlier. A wealthy young man who loves to party joins the army. His enemy captures and imprisons him for almost a year, hoping for ransom. Like Julian, his cell becomes a place for encounters with God. When freed, Francis hears God’s call to repair the church and, so begins a life of poverty, prayer and profound connection to God’s created natural world. He preaches to birds and sings praises to Brother Sun, Wind and Air, to Sister Moon and Water and to Mother Earth. For Francis, all of life is an image and pathway to God.

Today, as we celebrate and bless animals in our lives, these two saints lead me to proclaim: to have a pet is to be a mystic. Now, many of you pet owners may reject the title of mystic for yourselves, but hold off that first impulse. Here is a definition: “ one who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect ”. A mystic knows through experiential knowledge of the presence of the Holy rather than through book knowledge, abstract reasoning or second-hand knowledge. And isn’t that how you and I come to love a pet. That’s how my husband, Daniel, came to deeply love “ my ” cat, Millie. Before she came, he argued that “ cats belong in the barn ”. He protested that “ you have to take care of her - I’m not responsible. She won’t sleep in my bed. ”

Whatever kind of animal shares your life - in the bed or in the barn - your heart has opened to another living creature who is quite different from you. You have grown to see, experience and connect with more than what separates you to deeply bond. You have found a myriad of ways to move past the fur, the claws, the mess, the inconveniences, the expense to make a place in your life and your heart. I believe that is what happens to make one into a mystic - to see the mystery, love, compassion and union at the core of all life. That’s what opened St. Francis to kiss a leper. Now, that’s too far for me. Petting my cat, Millie, and blessing your pets is enough for me. That’s only one reason why I’m not a saint.

St. Francis believed and lived seeing the holy in all things. The entire world was God manifested in everything. Or as penned by poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Doesn't Hopkins' capture the full reality of our world today? Both a world "seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell" and a world with the "dearest freshness of deep down things...World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."? Daily we are reminded of this wide disparity in our world, between compassion shown and the violence wracked on other creatures, those four-legged, two-legged and with no legs at all.

Perhaps being sensitive to seeing God manifested in everything is good reason to have a pet. When we despair at the cruelty of others and intolerance in ourselves, we encounter the one or more creatures whom we have invited into our hearts. By their presence, we are drawn into a part of ourselves able to connect, and even more love, a part of God's diverse web. We are stretched to care about the well-being of another who doesn't look like us, sound like us, whose needs are not always convenient, whose death grieves us greatly.

In short, we grow more into being a mystic with an expanding ability to reach out and include what does not immediately or has not historically been part of our life, our world. Maybe that's one reason God has created such a vast and diverse world, from the cosmos to the microscopic.

As Christians, we proclaim creation as a powerful path and guide on our journey to be holy. Always we are stretched. Kissing lepers is beyond us. Yet, owning a pet puts us on the path of becoming a mystic who "is always both humble and compassionate for she knows that she does not know." (quote of Richard Rohr). And doesn't that put us in the presence of God? Amen