



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “A Gospel According to the Cat”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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### Centering Thoughts

*I have studied many philosophers and many cats. The wisdom of cats is infinitely superior.*  
Hippolyte Taine

*In ancient times cats were worshiped as gods; they have not forgotten this.* Terry Pratchett

*What is it that so many people find enchanting in animals? Their essence, their Being, is not covered up by the mind, as it is in most humans. And whenever you feel that essence in another, you also feel it in yourself.* Eckhart Tolle

### Sermon

The Memorial Day holiday has several traditions, not least is honoring those who gave their lives for our country. It is also the unofficial beginning of summer, and with that in mind, it also means that here at the UU Fellowship we turn to another species for inspiration. To dogs and ants, critters featured in the past two years, we add cats to our growing book of animal gospels.

You may wonder, why animals? Isn't this frivolous? Shouldn't we be dealing with serious issues facing our lives and the world? My method may seem like madness, but our animal friends offer great advice and insight, if we're willing to pay attention. Cats especially may even contribute to ending global war and advancing the peace, a fitting topic for Memorial weekend.

For all that cats and other animals mean to us and give to us they warrant our worship, our ascribing them worth. Our Principles and Sources confirm this. The Seventh Principle reminds us of our interdependence with all that exists. The First Source reminds us that direct experience with the wonders of creation can foster feelings of spirituality, awe and wonder. Who has not been awed by the beauty of a Bengal tiger or the incredible speed of a cheetah chasing prey? And who has not heard of a miracle story about an animal saving the life of a human or intelligently communicating with us? Our local celebrity, Cosmo, the African gray parrot, is one case in point.

So today let us listen to the gospel, the good news of the furry feline, once an object of devout worship. In ancient Egypt, cats were considered divine manifestations of the cat goddess, Bastet, who was believed to wield the beneficial power of the sun. No wonder she appeared as the sun-loving cat. Divine or not, cats were heaven-sent for they hunted rats, mice and other vermin

that threatened stored grains and other crops. Poisonous snakes, like asps and cobras, were also hunted by stealthy cats. Far more than pets, they were personal protectors. Cats were so important, killing one was punishable by death.

Animals associated with deities in ancient Egypt were frequently honored with mummification. Offering a mummified cat to the goddess Bastet was considered an act of piety. Hundreds of thousands of cat mummies have been discovered in ancient tombs. Today, farmers around the world recognize the cat's prized attributes and pray for their cat's good work.

In ancient Scandinavian myth, Freya, the skilled sorceress and goddess of Hel, the abode of the dead, would fly across the night sky on a chariot driven by two cats. One of her legacies remains our pairing of cats and witches at Halloween, when the spirits of the dead may walk among us. It didn't help the cat's reputation that it was not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. Some interpreted this as a condemnation of its demonic nature.

Glenn Dromgoole, author of *What Cats Teach Us*, writes that cats, demon or divine, model good grooming habits, eating a healthy fish diet, nurturing independent spirits and expressing individuality, embracing curiosity, and getting plenty of rest. Let's examine these from a religious standpoint.

First, good grooming habits. Oh, yes. I'm sure the common good is served when people in a crowd don't offend each other. Definitely a good teaching for religious groups. Since cleanliness is next to Godliness, I hope you all licked your fur like good little kittens earlier this morning.

Second, eating a healthy fish diet. Well, if the fish are on an approved sustainability list, we should all eat plenty of their Omega 3 healthy oils. Also, by eating a protein-rich diet and abstaining from sugars and carbs, as cats do, we might reduce America's soaring health-care costs while encouraging ethical eating. Another worthy lesson for us.

Third, nurturing independent spirits and individual expression. Well, that's something *we* could have taught the cat! Individuality is practically writ in stone for UUs. Our First Principle affirms the worth of the individual and the Fourth affirms differing truths. Of course, individuality works against our Seventh Principle's affirmation of our interdependence, but it's good to hold these in tension. Another acceptable lesson.

Fourth, embracing curiosity. Well, that may be the single most important quality of Unitarian Universalists. We are seekers, discoverers, experimenters, and ponderers. Because we hold no single doctrine for all of us, we must be curious about the world and our place in it. Like the cat, curiosity might kill us, but satisfaction keeps bringing us back. Definitely a cat character worth our imitation.

Lastly, cats teach getting plenty of rest. Hmmm. They may teach it, but I'm not sure we're getting it. And if we did, might this encourage laziness, procrastination, and a lack of productivity? The dominant American ethic abhors these qualities. Sloth, remember, appears on that list of seven deadly sins.

Why do cats try to teach us to waste two-thirds of our day like them, just sleeping or lying around in the sunniest spot available?

Like their wild relatives, cats sleep because hunting—stalking, pouncing, wrestling, and finally killing prey, even if it's only a tiny toy mouse—requires a great deal of energy. Also,

predators with few natural enemies can afford to sleep for long periods of time. They don't worry about becoming some other creature's kill. The wild cat's rhythm is rest, hunt, rest, wash, rest, then maybe hunt some more.

Although a housecat spends little energy hunting for food when humans deliver it every day, it may typically sleep up to 16 hours per day, in contrast to a human sleep pattern of 8 hours.

Seventy-percent of a cat's sleep comprises a light stage when they continue to register external sounds and scents, enabling them to quickly awaken and attack. The remaining sleep time consists of short periods of deep sleep requiring longer wake-up time. Deep sleeps usually end with long stretches of arms and legs, followed by a good washing.

American scholar William Lyon Phelps aptly describes this deep sleep. "A cat pours his body on the floor like water. It is restful just to see him."

A puddle of a pussycat, yes. But observing a cat is not rest enough for we humans have forgotten the ancient rhythm of rest, hunt, rest. We only have hunt, hunt, hunt in the form of work, work, work. Even if you're not working, you're likely busy, busy, busy.

Too many of us are too busy, stressed out, and pack too much into too little time. We revere speed and efficiency, not slowness and deliberation. And this comes at a cost.

Robert Sapolsky, a professor of biological and neurological sciences at Stanford University, observes that humans function well in response to an actual life-threatening stressor, but not to constant psycho-social, non-life-threatening stress such as worry over pleasing a boss, caring for a sick or aging relative, or paying off debts. These take a toll on our physical health. Among the risks: adult on-set diabetes, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal disorders, even stunted growth in stressed-out children. Stress challenges our immune systems, making us more susceptible to allergies and infectious disease, and it accelerates chromosomal DNA aging in otherwise healthy adults.

Sapolsky notes that even brain function is impaired. Under stress, neurons in the parts of the brain related to learning, memory and judgment don't function as well. If all this isn't scary enough, studies show stress even increases erectile dysfunction and menstrual disruption. Our bodies don't like this rhythm we've set for ourselves. It's as if we're hunting or being hunted all the time.

I know when I juggle too many responsibilities, I forget things. My judgment is affected, I risk harming relationships and lose patience with people who I imagine are wasting my time. The White Rabbit, surely an acquaintance of the Cheshire Cat, complained to Alice in Wonderland, "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get." Isn't that true for all of us? When we rush to get things done we're sloppy and make mistakes. We would do better to slow down and get things right the first time, we'd also make better decisions with a little longer deliberation sometimes. Time and busyness shouldn't be our master.

A self-avowed atheist, Sapolsky claims that doctrinal religions help reduce stress because they give answers to questions people stress over, such as death and damnation, karma and reincarnation. Since Unitarian Universalism doesn't give a one-size-fits-all answer to the unanswerable, we are probably more stressed than the average religious or spiritual person. But that's not the last word.

Through his study of baboons, Sapolsky recognizes that social support decreases stress. A community of support such as ours can reduce stress. Even cats prowl the neighborhood with

other frisky felines, and their wild cousins form prides. Cats are not entirely loners and they love human laps.

Much of this information about stress you probably know already, even if you're like me and often ignore it. But let me pile on a little more research to convince us both to change our ways.

Sleep scientists warn that when we don't get enough rest, we compound the ill effects of stress. William Dement, founder and director of the Stanford University Sleep Research Center, estimates that people sleep about one-and-a-half hours less per night than the average person did a hundred years ago. He blames the increase in car accidents to driver fatigue more than the increased number of cars on the road. Events like cruise line pilots running aground, negligence and error causing major oil spills, and similar disasters could also be the result of inadequate rest. Compound this with Sapolsky's research that stress also contributes to poor judgment and you see we're headed for more trouble.

Cats communicate a solution: reduce the stress and get more rest and sleep. This summer, find time to rest and relax. Lounge around a community pool, swing in a hammock, or rock that porch chair. Your extra rest will help you cope better and will give your body and spirit time to heal. I may be no doctor and I may house no cats in my home, but as your minister, your spiritual director, I direct you to renew your spirit—even if it means falling asleep in a service on Sunday morning!

The busyness of the world isn't going to go away overnight, but if we all chose to slow down a bit, we might encourage a little more peace than war. As the wise Lao-tse advised, if there is to be peace in the world it must begin with peace in the heart. There's no better example of peace than a thoroughly relaxed, sleeping in the sunshine, cat.

Be like the cat. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. How has your connection to animals, whether from afar or up close, affected your life?
2. Please share a time you may have felt awe and wonder over the mysterious doings of animals.
3. Do you get enough rest to restore your spirit or energy? What challenges your ability to fully rest or relax?
4. If you have a spiritual or physical practice that helps you center, reduce anxiety or stress, and relax, what keeps you committed to it? Or, what prevents you from following a practice?