

All Creatures Big and Small

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Autumn, that glorious show of nature's pageantry, is about to close. On the Oregon Coast, we savor each passing day of light knowing there will be less and less of it as we head towards year's end. I haven't met a person yet who fails to appreciate the gift of blue-sky sunshiny days. Some of my favorite things occur in autumn: the dreamy quality of that lingering light, appreciated all the more because it's fleeting; the elegant spider webs that in their finery represent such beauty and tenacity; the drifting leaves that float on the breeze, reminiscent of my Michigan childhood when I jumped in huge stacks of maple leaves as if they were golden coins raked to the curb by my father. I'd hang around till dark when Daddy would light the bonfire. A long-ago favorite columnist of mine, Gladys Tabor, said her recipe for troubles was to have a picnic on a cloudless blue day, sit on warm rich earth, let the breeze blow in her hair and read poetry. She added that a dog or two in the mix was a plus.

Early October is the time for Blessing of the Animals, a custom conducted in remembrance of St. Francis of Assisi's love for all creatures. Throughout the world, processions of animals from dogs and cats to hamsters and horses are led to church for a special blessing. Whether it's a bustling family, lonely senior or single, or a patient in the hospital trying to get well, the bond between people and animals is strong and like no other. It was quite a sight to see pairs of creatures, one human, one animal, sitting in the pews of St. Catherine's Episcopal Church this month. The furry ones were well behaved and received their blessings with dignity. Special treats helped. Smiles abounded in what could only be called a reminder of the circle of life that holds us all.

Recently I learned the story of a horse called Jazz and a goat named Nadia. On our walks, we'd often see Jazz and her companion horses in the stable, and we'd stop to give them carrots. Then we noticed her mates were gone and only she remained. Her owner told us Jazz had been mourning the death of her fellow horses, standing for hours near their blankets draped over the fence. In an effort to soothe her, the owners bought a goat as they'd learned that goats and horses often make good soul mates. "It made all the difference," our neighbor told us. Jazz brightened up and now is upset only when they put Nadia out to clean up brambles. We could see for ourselves. Nadia darted in and out of Jazzy's legs, happily munching hay. Jazz was munching too, hardly noticing us, but often brushing up against Nadia, her now favorite friend. We were smiling, and I could swear Nadia and Jazz were smiling too. Turns out goats have a long history of helping calm skittish horses. The term "I've got your goat," came from the racetrack when competitors would steal a horse's goat to depress a champion and get him/her off their game.

One of my all-time favorite animal friends is Leche, a Great Pyrenees, a breed known for faithfulness in guarding flocks of sheep. Research by Idaho State University shows sheep tend to travel greater distances in the presence of a guard dog such as Leche. They say it's likely the sheep, though accustomed to predators, are less concerned about them simply because of the presence of their guardian dog. The study tracked herds of sheep in which half were left alone and half were guarded. The guarded flocks were less stressed and more at ease to travel farther.

Sort of like us, I think. We're less stressed and more at ease when our guardian is on the job, something we US citizens have been doubtful of lately. To keep my spirits up, I think I'll stick with my furry friends, the Leche's, Jazzy's and Nadia's of the world. And hang on to the words of St. Francis:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love...
Where there is darkness, light.