

ALL CREATURES KIN

BY GAYLE BOSS



The deepest pain of one's life is the pain of not being a saint.

— N. Gordon Cosby, sermon in *By Grace Transformed*



HOUGH NOT THE ONLY saint-statue sold at Walmart.com, Saint Francis of Assisi is far and away the most popular. Twenty-eight different representations of him, priced from \$38 to \$1900, are available, and include birds: resting on his shoulders, on his head, in his hands. Some also depict the saint welcoming rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, a lamb, a fox, a fawn, a wolf, or a small horse. It's not because he wed himself to Lady Poverty that we warm to the little man from Assisi. It's his way with animals that endears us.

While Francis is the one we know, he's preceded in the family tree of saints by many older brothers and sisters equally at ease among animals. Almost a thousand years before Francis, the desert abbas and ammas, then later the monks of Western Europe and of Ireland, the storytellers say, communed just as easily with the wild world. The Irish saint Columban, walking in the woods, would call out to the creatures, and "they would come at once to his call, and he would stroke them with his hand and caress them: and the wild things and the birds would leap and frisk about him for sheer happiness."¹

And not just the small, fuzzy ones. Like Francis, Columban had conversation with wolves and at least one bear. In warmer climates saints also moved freely among the reputedly fierce:

The desert father Helenus once came upon certain monks on a Sabbath day and asked why they were not at Mass. "The priest is across the river," they told the abbot, "which is too deep to ford and in which dwells a fearsome crocodile."

Coming to the bank of the river the abbot saw it was indeed deep, and he saw the bubbles of a great creature breathing beneath. So he called to the crocodile, and it came obediently to the bank. Stepping upon the beast's back, he directed it to kindly ferry him to the opposite side. They crossed with good speed, and Helenus went ashore. Soon he found the priest and asked him to come with him to say Mass for the brothers across the river.

When they came to the bank, Helenus again summoned the crocodile, which a second time rose and flattened its back. The abbot stepped lightly aboard and motioned for the priest to do likewise. Terrified, the priest could not. So Helenus rode on the crocodile's back

to the shore from which he had come, where the brothers stood as amazed and terrified as the priest on the opposite side. And great was their admiration for the abbot Helenus and for his faith.²

A charming story, but not realistic. It is more a fairy tale than an instructional tale. Who of us, after all, no matter how spiritually mature, would step aboard even one of the small alligators living at the edge of a Florida golf course?



IN A TIME BEFORE firearms, pesticides, and bulldozers, people in Western civilizations often felt themselves oppressed by the animal kingdom. Animals prevented them from traveling to certain places; they ate crops and flocks; they carried disease. People feared for small children playing in the countryside. Despite the biblical injunction to “have dominion” over animals, humans found all but a few domesticated species largely beyond their control.

While most people responded by building a better mousetrap—or wolf trap, rabbit trap, crocodile trap, etc.—some few instead asked, “What would the most holy person we know do when distressed by these creatures?” The stories they wrote were their answers. Many of the storytellers say they were eyewitnesses to the events.

Only occasionally in these stories do the saints respond like the young and future king David, who killed a lion and a bear that were threatening his flocks; none of the saints celebrate the kill, as David did. The vast majority of stories show the saints in the likeness of Daniel, gentling the lions in the den he was made to share with them. In the hagiographies, the lions, in turn, become gentle with creatures they would formerly have devoured. For example, after the fifth-century abbot Gerasimus pulls a sharp reed from a lion’s paw, the beast follows him home and gladly takes up the task of guarding the monastery’s donkey while it grazes.

When, in these stories, the kindness of a saint disintegrates one oppressive relationship, that kindness ripples through the whole creation. Creatures of all kinds respond to kindness with kindness. Each one treats every other in kind—as one of its own kind, its kin, to the point of changing its diet, the bottom-line marker of a conversion. The result is Isaiah 11 brought to life, a second Eden where “They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain” (RSV, vs. 9).

Even when these stories were first recorded most people didn't take them as directives. They kept building and setting their better traps. But—and here's the difference—they heard the stories of saints among animals as aspirational. If only one were near enough to the heart of God, this is how she would behave with creatures. This is how God would behave with them. The stories didn't seem unrealistic, merely difficult.



WE'VE DISMISSED AS QUAINFABLES the stories about godliness gentling animals, in part, because it would cost us too much to believe them. It would cost us our perfect gardens and house foundations, our svelte lawns, and our golf courses, subdivisions, and running trails built on wetlands. To have an ample supply of the meat we want at the prices we want, we engineer huge agricultural production companies that confine pigs (more intelligent than dogs) and chickens in spaces too small for them to turn around. To have another Starbucks and cell phone store even closer to home, we bulldoze the last meadow habitat in the suburb. And in terms of our oppression of animals, that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Most of us do, I think, wriggle with dis-ease when we become aware of how we oppress animals to ensure us everything from cheap meat and tearless shampoo to perfect lawns and another strip mall. But we look away because these things do, after all, provide us jobs and pleasures we don't want to do without. I love knowing I can be at a Starbucks in two minutes.

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We also look away because we haven't experienced or imagined how much we have to gain by companioning them.

One day hunters from the Bishop of Durham's household set their hounds on a splendid stag in the wood where Godric lived as a hermit. Hard-pressed, the creature made for the hermitage and begged his help. The monk brought the stag inside, where it dropped, exhausted. Hearing the baying hounds approach, he went outside and stood quietly as they circled his shelter, baying and leaping. When the hunters arrived, they questioned Godric about the stag. He replied, "God knows where he may be." Perceiving his holiness, the hunters begged Godric's pardon for their bold intrusion. The stag rested with the saint until nightfall, then went free. But thereafter it would return to visit him and lie at his feet in gratitude.

When I read this story to young children, all of them want to be Godric rather than the hunters.

The Venerable Bede tells a story about St. Cuthbert. At least once, when the saint waded out of the sea after having prayed there in the night, two otters came and warmed his feet with their pantings and their fur. Sister Benedicta Ward says that to Bede, this was "a man so transfigured in prayer that the right order of creation was in him restored. For Bede, St. Cuthbert was the New Adam, once more at peace with all creation, naming the animals, who were the first servant and the first friend."³

Sister Ward suggests we are not to take stories like this literally. Still, we can read them aspirationally, as stories that could be literally real if we were wholly Christ-like. Until we are, they can be held as icons, images through which we see people so "steadfast in simplicity"⁴ that animals perceive them as trustworthy.

 ANNA BREYTENBACH is a professional animal communicator. Trained at the Assisi International Animal Institute in California and based in South Africa, she travels the world helping people learn to communicate with animals, both to resolve conflicts with them and to enhance rapport with them.

A 2013 documentary, *The Animal Communicator*,⁵ shows Breytenbach sitting among a troop of baboons that has been wreaking havoc at the

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fringes of Capetown, stealing food, breaking into cars, and attacking residents. The animals, including the alpha male, gently touch and groom her. In another scene she helps a man who runs a big cat sanctuary. He has taken in a black leopard named Diablo, abused in a zoo and vicious toward all who approach. Though Breytenbach has not met the leopard before, as she sits near him, he stops snarling, and she learns what troubles him, including that he is worried about cubs that lived with him at the zoo—history she has not been told. She mediates between leopard and sanctuary owner, conveying to each the intentions of the other. The cat relaxes, leaving his shelter for the first time, even “talking” to the sanctuary owner, who, through tears, says, “He’s a completely different cat” and changes his name to Spirit.

Anna Breytenbach does not claim any particular genius.

Psychic animal communication is natural; everyone can talk with animals! Most of us have simply forgotten how but can recall instances from our childhood or other times in our lives.... We can all remember how to listen and perceive the true nature and essence of an animal’s unique personality and soul.... The key to receptivity lies in intention— which is as much a matter of the heart as it is of the mind.⁶

Many people, through their own experience, have come to believe Anna Breytenbach. Her workshops in Europe, Africa, and the United States are filled months in advance.



WHEN FRANCIS DENOUNCED his family wealth and vowed to live a poor man among the poor, he became, by that act, the patron of animals and nature too. None is poorer – and more voiceless – among us than the creatures of the natural world. If we give voice to these poor, we can be sure that, like Francis, we will become broadly known as fools, and to a few as God’s fools.⁷

Francis is known for his joyful canticles to the creation. He sang as only a healed man can. While his fragile body was wracked until the end by one pain after another, he was more whole than anyone his society had ever seen. Reunited with God-in-Christ, he was reunited with all of God’s creation. He had been healed of what Anna Breytenbach calls humanity’s “great separation sickness.”

Seamus Heaney, in his poem “St. Kevin and the Blackbird,”⁸ retells the story of how the Irish holy man, while kneeling in prayer, stretches out his arms to heaven. Because his cell is so narrow, one of his arms juts out the window. As he holds it outstretched, palm up, a blackbird lights and lays her eggs there. Kevin senses himself “linked/Into the network of eternal life.” That link binds him to stay kneeling, arm outstretched, through the all the weeks and weathers of the bird’s nesting until her young are hatched and fledged.

Heaney invites us to imagine being Kevin. Imagine this posture’s ache moving through the body, numbing the mind. Imagine the possibility that this posture of protection and connection brings a forgetfulness so complete that he forgets himself, forgets the bird, and the name of the river that runs beside them. No longer separate from anything in all creation, he is bound to all of it. And profoundly free.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Published in 1934 by Constable and Co., Ltd., London.
- 2 This story and others in this essay are my adaptations of the longer versions in Helen Waddell’s book *Beasts and Saints*.
- 3 Waddell, p.xxv
- 4 This is the description of the heart of St. Macarius of Alexandria, who healed the whelp of a hyena and ever after earned the creature’s affection. In Waddell, p.12.
- 5 *The Animal Communicator*, 52 mins., produced by Natural History Unit, Africa (NHU Africa).
- 6 Anna Breytenbach, <http://animalspirit.org>, accessed 1/10/14.
- 7 For an engaging portrait of Francis, see Julien Green’s *God’s Fool: The Life and Times of Francis of Assisi*, trans. Peter Heinegg (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985).
- 8 Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997).

REFLECTION QUESTION:

How do the stories of the saints and others who loved and longed to free animals from oppression inspire you to do the same?