

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
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**~Blessing of the Animals~**  
**A Hummingbird, Lions, Tigers, A Bear, Elephants,**  
**A Dog, That Man, and Us**

“In the slender shoulders of the myrtle tree outside my kitchen window, a hummingbird built her nest.” This is writer Barbara Kingsolver’s story. “... [My] eye caught a flicker of motion outside,” she continues, “and there she was, hovering.... She held in the tip of her beak a wisp of wadded spiderweb so tiny I wasn’t even sure it was there, until she carefully smoodged it onto the branch. She vanished ... but in less than a minute, she was back with another tiny white tuft that she stuck on top of the first. For more than an hour, she returned again and again, ... building up by infinitesimal degrees a whitish lump on the branch – and leaving me ... in awe of the supply of spiderwebbing on the face of the land.

“... When the lump had grown big enough – when some genetic trigger in her small brain said, ‘Now, that will do’ – she stopped gathering and sat down on her little tuffet, wagging her wings and tiny rounded underbelly to shape the blob into a cup that would easily have fit inside my cupped hand. Then she hovered up to inspect it from this side and that, settled and waddled with greater fervor, hovered and appraised some more, and dashed off again. She began now to return with fine filaments of shredded bark, which she wove into the webbing along with some dry leaflets and a slap-dab or two of lichen pressed onto the outside for curb appeal.

“When she had made of all this a perfect, symmetrical cup, she did the most surprising thing of all: She sat on it, stretched herself forward, extended the unbelievable length of her tongue, and *licked* her new nest in a long, upward stroke from bottom to rim. Then she rotated herself a minute degree, leaned forward, and licked again. I watched her go all the way around, licking the entire nest in a slow rotation that took ten minutes to complete, and ended precisely back at her starting point.

Passed down from hummingbird great-grandmothers immemorial, a

spectacular genetic map in her mind had instructed her at every step, from snipping out with her beak the first spiderweb tuft to laying down whatever salivary secretion was needed to accrete and finalize her essential creation.

“Then, suddenly, that was that. Her busy urgency vanished, and she settled in for the long stillness of laying and incubation.

“If you had been standing with me at my kitchen sink to witness all this,” Barbara Kingsolver concludes, “you would likely have breathed softly, as I did, ‘My G\*d.’”<sup>1</sup>

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Just hearing stories like this calls us to open our senses, slow our breathing, and refine our attention. I think of Unitarian minister and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, famously perched on that hilltop, suddenly aware that he was a part of everything, sensing the boundaries of his self dissolving as he became permeable to the world. He wrote, “In the woods ... Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of G\*d. ... I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.”<sup>2</sup>

When we make ourselves available to receive it, this is the kind of vision that nature proffers, that animals – our wild kin – can inspire.

Born and raised in South Africa, Lawrence Anthony was steward of a 5,000 acre game reserve when, in 1999, he was offered nine wild elephants who, having become violent towards humans, were to be shot. Lawrence Anthony said yes, and through his work to heal their trauma and earn their trust, he became known as the elephant whisperer.

In 2003, after viewing TV footage of U.S. troops moving into Baghdad, he set off immediately to save the city’s zoo, the largest in the Middle East. Within days, he arrived in the Iraqi capital with a car full of veterinary supplies, only to find just 35 of the original 650 animals. Some were dead; others had been carried off by looters. The survivors included lions, tigers, and a bear, all near death. For six months, with fighting

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Kingsolver, “A Fist in the Eye of G\*d,” in *Small Wonder*, pp. 93-95

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Chapter 1, *Nature* (punctuation his; spelling mine)

erupting around him, he nurtured them back to health, dragging buckets of water from a nearby canal, and enlisting US and Iraqi soldiers to volunteer to help. The US Army awarded him a medal for bravery.<sup>3</sup>

In 2012, at the age of 61, Lawrence Anthony was felled by a heart attack. No one knows how word of his death reached them, but two herds of the formerly rogue South African elephants made their way through the Zululand bush, until they reached the home of the man who had saved their lives. “They had not visited the house for a year and a half, and it must have taken them about 12 hours to make the journey,” Lawrence’s son, Dylan, reported. “The first herd arrived on Sunday, and the second herd, a day later. They all hung around for about two days, before making their way back into the bush.” They had come to share their grief with the bereaved family, and to say goodbye to their benefactor. The photos of the elephant’s funeral procession are astonishing.<sup>4</sup>

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Author and environmental activist Marc Ian Barasch writes, “A friend told me of visiting the Dalai Lama ... in India, and asking him for a succinct definition of compassion. She prefaced her question by describing how heart-stricken she’d felt when, earlier that day, she’d seen a man in the street beating a mangy stray dog, with a stick.

‘Compassion,’ the Dalai Lama told her,  
‘is when you feel as sorry for the man  
as you do for the dog.’”<sup>5</sup>

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Beloved spiritual companions,  
a hummingbird, lions, tigers, a bear, elephants, a dog, that man,

*and us:*

My G\*d.

May all mean egotism vanish.

May the Universal Being circulate through us,  
the lovers of uncontained and immortal beauty.

May our hearts be filled with compassion.

May all beings be well.

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<sup>3</sup> “The Man Who Saved the Baghdad Zoo,” *The Week*, March 23, 2012

<sup>4</sup> “Wild Elephants Mourn Death of Famous Elephant Whisperer,” beliefnet.com  
Please see [beliefnet.com/Inspiration/Home-Page-News-and-Views/Wild-Elephants-Mourn-Death-of-famed-Elephant-Whisperer.aspx?p=5#ikdZ7Cu0CfKeWWqk.99](http://beliefnet.com/Inspiration/Home-Page-News-and-Views/Wild-Elephants-Mourn-Death-of-famed-Elephant-Whisperer.aspx?p=5#ikdZ7Cu0CfKeWWqk.99)

<sup>5</sup> Marc Ian Barasch, *Field Notes on the Compassionate Life*, p. 117