

I Love My Chicken: The Avoidable Suffering of Animals and Humans

Sunday, August 23, 2026

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

A Blessing for a New School Year

Readings by Hal Herzog, PhD, and Yujin Kim, DVM, PhD.

Hymns: Joy in the Morning (Adam Podd), #134 Our World Is One World, #203 All Creatures of the Earth and Sky (vs. 1-4). Special music: Trumpet Voluntary in D major, on piano (John Stanley, 1712-1786), Goodbye from *Hachi: A Dog Tale* (Jan Kaszmarek, 1953-2024), Higher Ground (written in 1892 by Johnson Oatman Jr. & Charles Gabriel, arr. Mark Hayes).

Chalice Lighting Words (responsive reading)

We light this chalice in honor of the animal realm,
The furred and hooved, two-legged, four-legged, or many-legged,
The feathered or scaly, fanged and clawed, wild or tame.
We honor the gentle and fierce, hard shelled or tender-hearted,
Let us remember that all creatures deserve respect and care,
for we are all related.

Sermon:

St. Francis of Assisi lived from 1182 till 1226. He is the patron saint of animals and the environment. St. Francis wrote this about other creatures: “Not to hurt our humble kindred is our first duty to them. But to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission—to be of service to them whenever they require it.” For us today, responding to this challenge and this mission is easier when we are imagining fuzzy, furry critters with big round eyes and a large head or even thinking about softly feathered birds in bright colors. According to Hal Herzog, this is what psychologists call the *cute response* in humans. He is a scientist who studies human behavior toward animals.

Herzog writes that “the ways that human beings think about animals are mired in an uncomfortable mix of logic and emotion.” Depending on the animal in question, we might think of it as a pet, as a member of the family, as a source of labor, or as food. According to one scholar, pets are defined as those animals that are allowed in the house, given a name, and never eaten. *Non-pets* are not so lucky. Pigs, for example are as intelligent as dogs and often as gentle, but they are a source of meat¹. A rat can be a pet or a pest, or it can be a lab-experiment subject. As you can see on the inside of the order of service, the stag beetle is fierce looking, though harmless. Children in Japan buy them and keep them as pets. Herzog’s book about animal-human interactions is entitled *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat*. We are contradictory, inconsistent, and sometimes hypocritical about animals, Herzog says, because we are human beings.

It’s easy for us to think of chicken as meat: fried, grilled, or chilled on a green salad. But at her home in rural New Hampshire, the writer Sy Montgomery is raising a bunch of chickens, and they all have names. They give her company and endless entertainment as well as eggs for food. In her book *What the Chicken Knows*, Montgomery describes the colorful patterns and

personalities of the different breeds of her chickens. She says they are “affectionate, industrious, and resourceful.” “Chickens know how to return to their barn or coop as the day’s nearing its end.” They are “intelligent and highly social. “Researchers have documented that an average chicken can recognize and remember more than 100 other chickens.” She gives advice to others about their chicken, such as: “Sometimes a rooster that seems about to attack is actually showing that he likes you. Pick him up!” She says that cuddling will calm down a rooster.²

Anthropomorphizing is the term for treating animals like people or for thinking that we know what they’re thinking. Hence, Montgomery reminds us that chickens and all other birds are more closely related to reptiles than to mammals, which is what people are. Birds experience the world in ways we cannot. Montgomery finds the differences thrilling. Sometimes revolting. For example, when one of her hens was bleeding a little bit from a cut on its neck, the others turned on it. If Montgomery hadn’t grabbed it, they would have pecked it to death. This behavior is not unusual among chickens.³

Montgomery’s hens are able range freely on her property, even into the neighbor’s yard. Most egg-laying hens in this country, however, are in a cage they can’t leave or turn around in, and they are crammed in with other hens. No room to stretch or groom their feathers. While things have been getting better in the raising of egg-laying hens in this country, the dominant model for egg production is still the factory model. One man who had worked in a factory farm told Montgomery it was a “dirty overcrowded warehouse that resembled a prison camp.”⁴

In the United States, animal shelters and local humane societies get the largest share of donations for animal welfare activities, but those donations are way out of proportion to how many animals are involved in local shelters. That is, the overwhelming majority of animal suffering takes place in animal agriculture.

Aided by government policies over more than a half century, industrial agriculture has replaced smaller, independently owned farms with confined-animal feeding operations (CAFOs). It is more economically efficient for hogs, cows, and chickens to be bred, born, fed and raised on enormous plantations and then crated and shipped far away to slaughtering factories. It leads to cheaper food than smaller, traditional farms do. Yet many of the costs of industrial agriculture are not reflected in the market price we pay. Many of the costs are borne by the land, the animals, the workers, and future generations of people.

This is the argument of Wendell Berry, a farmer, novelist, poet and activist from Kentucky, who is now 92. For example, he points out that nearly all confined livestock animals never see the sky or have any room to move around in. Animal waste pollutes the nearby water and puts a burning stench in the air of the local community.

Confined animal farming requires antibiotics to stop disease, yet this leads pathogens to develop resistance and become stronger, more dangerous. Recently there was an outbreak of sickness from contaminated lettuce from a large farming corporation. Meat, however, remains the most dangerous kind of food we can eat, Herzog says.⁵ Also, fish carry at least 50 kinds of transmittable parasites. Because of confined farming, when a disease breaks out among poultry, pork, or beef livestock, thousands of animals must be destroyed. We can’t even say that those animals suffered so that human beings could eat. They were collateral damage of the system.

The next few sentences may be hard to listen to, so if you want to pay attention to your breathing instead of my words, I’ll tell you when I’m done with the chickens. The most popular

model of mass-production meat is the broiler hen. It's why chicken has risen past beef as America's most popular meat. The broiler hen was developed 40 years ago by a large corporate merger of Tyson Foods and Upjohn Pharmaceuticals. This model, this bird, grows faster than it used to, eats less food, and has a shorter life—as brief as six weeks. A pastured chicken, by contrast, can live for three or four years. Because consumers prefer white meat, the broiler hen was bred to have unnaturally big breast meat. The birds' extra weight damages their legs, twisting their tendons. According to a professor of animal welfare at Cambridge University, “severe leg pain in chickens is the world's largest animal welfare problem.”⁶

Chicken warehouses are dark and the air is humid. Each one reeks of the ammonia fumes of the waste produced by 30,000 hens. When it's time for harvesting, some factories use machines to catch the chickens and scoop them up. Yet in most chicken factories, it is still the case that groups of low-paid workers go into the warehouses in the dark to catch the chickens by hand. They carry them upside down, by their legs. They put them in wire cages and load them onto trucks. At a slaughtering facility, more low-wage workers spend hours at assembly lines for killing the birds, plucking their feathers, and cutting them up. Okay, I'm done with the chickens.

When I review information like this, my conscience tells me that I should cease eating meat, perhaps even stop using all animal products. At some times in my life, I have stopped eating meat. I am a lapsed vegetarian, or perhaps a fake one. Indeed, according to Herzog, former vegetarians in this country outnumber current vegetarians by 4 to 1.

To be sure, there are people who have allergic reactions to many types of food, but meat is not one of them. Some people who used to be vegetarians now choose to eat a small amount of animal protein every few days based on medical advice. For consumers who seek to avoid carbohydrates or don't like salads, fruits and vegetables very much, meat or fish is a lot easier. Other people just love the flavors and textures of meat, or certain meat recipes are a source of connection with their cultures or families.

I rarely cook meat or fish for myself, and I am grateful that I'm not allergic to peanut butter or soybean products like tofu, because I eat those things a lot. I like most vegetables. I buy eggs, milk and cheese that come from smaller producers that are not far away. At restaurants or fundraising banquets, I try to order a vegetarian dish.

When I've ordered fish, I've tried to use the Seafood Watch Guide from the Monterey Bay Aquarium. It's a little brochure (as well as a [website](#)) focused on sustainable kinds of seafood.⁷ Even while using the guide, I can't be sure of the true origin or name of a fish I'm being served. However, if a meal has already been served with meat, or if there's a leftover with meat, I might have some of it. I hate to see food go to waste.

I am not as faithful or disciplined as I could be. Yet I find guidance in Michael Pollen's book *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*. His core message is: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” The book is about nutrition, farming, industrial food production, and human health. By “eat food,” Pollan means to reduce eating foods that have been processed a lot, choose fresh foods, and avoid those with a dozen or more unfamiliar terms on their ingredient list. Seven words are his key to responsible eating which is also healthy eating: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

Of course, in these times of political disruption in the world, many of us may not feel we can summon the attention or strength to address farm animal suffering, even if we don't like it.

There's too much renewed cruelty against human beings right now, which we need to face and resist. Feeling overwhelmed is an understandable feeling. To be sure, none of us has to try to tackle all the harmful problems of the systems in which we participate.

Yet *food* is one area where each one of us has the power in our hands to make a difference every single day. As Michael Pollan writes: "We all eat! We have choices." Our choices can give us influence over farming, the treatment of animals, and the stewardship of farmlands and local ecosystems.

Every time we eat a meal that's higher in plants and lower in meat, we are making a difference. Eating a few more meals every week without meat reduces demand for the animals that provide it. Patronizing vegetarian restaurants is a way to support the people who devote their livelihoods to reducing animal suffering.

When we pay our money to producers of meat, milk, fruits, vegetables, and flowers who are local producers, we reduce the use of petroleum in the food and flower industries. Buying locally and regionally supports farmers who care for the animals and plants. And they care about us, the consumers. Pollan celebrates that sales are thriving for food that is local and free of pesticides and for meat raised in pastures. "Farmers' markets are popping up like mushrooms," he writes.⁸ Reversing a century-long trend, the number of farmers in the country is growing again. Indeed, more than 1 million farmers have been in the business for ten years or less.⁹

Three or four percent of Americans are committed to avoiding all animal products. This is the only ethical choice for them. This means no dairy or eggs, no leather products or beeswax. It means no gelatin unless it's been made without cartilage rendered from animal joints. While three or four percent of the country might seem small, vegan consumers have improved the marketplace in which everyone shops. This has given us many choices for dairy-free ice cream and yogurt and meat substitutes that are nutritious and flavorful.

In 1848, the English nonconformist minister and slavery abolitionist John Agnell James wrote: "I am but one — but *I am* one. I cannot do much, but I can do something: and all I can do, I ought to do; and by God's grace I will do." We can affirm the importance of our individual actions, but we can also remember how much we can accomplish when we join with others.

For example, the work of humane farming organizations has been generating results. After more than a year of organizing public attention and pressure on the sixth largest grocery store corporation in America, the non-profit Humane League reports that the corporation has banned the extreme confinement of egg-laying hens in their supply chains. Moreover, in 3,000 locations, the restaurant chains IHOP and Applebee's now use only cage-free eggs. Thanks to the work of organizations and the choices of consumers, by now at least 45% of egg-laying hens can live outside of cages for a good part of the day. The scales are tipping away from cruelty.

Organizations dedicated to local agriculture, ethical eating, and animal welfare have arisen in diverse faith groups, such as The Jewish Center for Ethical Eating and Green Islam. The [UU Animal Ministry](#) has 45 local chapters in the United States, and it has individual donors and members, including me.

The writer and farmer Wendell Berry reminds us that "eating is an agricultural act." He is not a vegetarian, but he seeks to respect the animals that we consume and to honor the dignity of people who work in agriculture. He urges us to sustain local ecosystems for generations to come.

The ordinary act of eating is a miracle. It connects us to the soil, seas and rivers and to this whole wide earth. It connects us to the people who came before us and to those who will follow us.

As we determine our ethical responsibilities and make choices about what we eat and where it comes from, we can remember all our connections. We are dependent on other people and other beings, and they depend on us. As we recognize our dependence on sources of life outside ourselves, let us be humbled. Let us be reverent before the energy and abundance of life. Amen.

Readings:

Psychology professor Hal Herzog defines anthropomorphism as the tendency of human beings to expect or assume that other animals have human traits, perspectives and motivations is known as anthropomorphism. Herzog is an expert on human-animal relations and a cat owner. In Some We Love, Some We Hate, and Some We Eat, he writes:

There is a problem with projecting our mentality to other species. Our interpretation of their behavior is often wrong. The perpetual smiley faces of the dolphins at Sea World indicate that these animals are happy spending their lives swimming in endless circles around a concrete tank. Wrong. Or, the yawn of an alpha male baboon means that he is bored. Wrong. (He is using the display of his formidable canine teeth to say, “I can rip your face off.”) When my cat, Tilly, gently rubs her face on my leg, she is snowing that she loves me. Wrong. She is scent-marking my legs with glands on her cheeks, telling the world that she owns me.

From the Readers Write section in November 2025 issue of The Sun, a literary magazine. The prompt for the month was wild animals. This is by Yujin Kim, DVM, PhD, from New York City.

I’m a veterinarian and spend my workdays healing people’s cherished pets. At lunchtime I walk to New York City’s Central Park with fresh carrots and strawberries for the carriage horses and walnuts for the squirrels. Above me fly pigeons, wheeling and dipping on ragged wings, their bodies battered by a city that barely tolerates their presence. Some limp on a single leg; others drag mangled feet caught too many times in grates. I’ve seen them crushed under taxi wheels, flattened like paper.

I’ve loved birds since I was a child—their pleasant chirping, their delicate wings. When I was in middle school, I would stand in the bitter cold, binoculars pressed to my face, so entranced by waterfowl that I forgot my frozen fingers. Later, during winter breaks, I traveled to Puerto Rico to search for species of birds found nowhere else in the world, and I held my breath as I watched them, then sketched their elegant forms in notebooks. But I have never sketched a pigeon. No one celebrates them. They are called dirty, diseased, a nuisance.

And yet they persist. Maybe they are no different from any of us who came to this city hoping to make it. I believe I will *paint* them: their iridescent feathers, their bent necks, their sometimes-lifeless bodies.

Even the ones we overlook deserve a place in our memory.

¹ Hal Herzog, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight about Animals*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2021: Harper Perennial), 52.

² Sy Montgomery, *What the Chicken Knows: An Appreciation of the World's Most Familiar Bird* (New York, 2024: Atria Books), viii.

³ Montgomery, xvii.

⁴ Montgomery, 7.

⁵ See also "Diseases suffered by animals living on land farms," Animal Ethics.

<https://www.animal-ethics.org/diseases-suffered-animals-living-land-farms/>

⁶ Herzog, 169.

⁷ Seafood Watch, Monterey Bay Aquarium. Accessed August 23, 2026. <https://www.seafoodwatch.org/>

⁸ Michael Pollan, introduction to *Bringing it to the Table: On Farming and Food*, by Wendell Berry (Berkeley, 2009: Counterpoint), v.

⁹ "Who Is the American Farmer?," USA Facts. Accessed August 22, 2026. <https://usafacts.org/articles/farmer-demographics/>