

I was quite shocked when Scott asked me to speak in response to Chapter 7 of Church of the Wild. I had not been part of any group that was addressing this book, but I had been reading along in it just for my own interest. I wasn't totally unfamiliar with the author's orientation nor with the content of Chapter 7 which is entitled, Courtship of the Particular.

When I first read this chapter it immediately made me think of some very particular events when I had encountered the natural world and brought back some of the feelings that I had had in those times. This morning I would like to tell you a couple of stories of those times.

As you know, I lived most of my adult life in New York City. I was there by necessity and was never really comfortable in that environment so I would often leave it to spend at least a little time in other environments. One of the things I would do occasionally was to drive up to Bear Mountain and hike through the most remote trails in that park. One Saturday when I was doing that, I was about half an hour along one of the trails when I was stopped dead in my tracks. About 20 yards ahead of me was a magnificent stag standing right in the middle of the trail and looking directly at me. He was huge with a full rack of antlers. His demeanor was not at all threatening but I understood that I was supposed to stop. So, I did. Very soon, I began to be aware that there were a few deer around me. Then, there were more and more. They were so close that I could smell them, I could hear their breathing, and I could hear their snorting and crunching as they grazed all around me. After a few moments, the whole herd had drifted by me and, finally, I saw the stag turn and dash away. I was stunned by the whole event. The stag was an immensely powerful creature. His message to me was unthreatening but clear. And, to have witnessed, indeed, been part of, their passing through that space felt like a huge privilege.

At a totally different time and place, there was another event... quite different but with a similar meaning. I often traveled in the summer, again to gain some relief from the City. One year I was in Greece and had gone up to Delphi, the home of the Delphic Oracle but also the site of a large Greek theatre. I had arrived at the theatre about three hours before the performance so I decided to take a walk up into the hills behind the theatre. There was a rocky trail that I followed. After I had walked about half an hour on this trail, it opened into a beautiful grassy meadow so I just kept going. As I walked, a few sheep began to join me. They just walked along with me. But, as we walked, more and more sheep came until I had the company of about 50 sheep. They weren't jostling me or each other. They just walked very gently with me. They were very beautiful – all fluffy and white. I loved their presence but, after a time, I got a little nervous because I was wondering what the sheep would do when I turned to go back downhill to the theatre. Finally, I did turn back and they turned too. They were going to follow me down. I was imagining my entry into the theatre along with my flock. Right then, I decided that there surely must be a shepherd somewhere and that I had better figure out how to return his sheep to him. So, I went back up to the meadow with my companions still surrounding me and we were walking further and further into it when I saw, at a distance, a young shepherd, running towards me. He must have been sleeping but, finally, he was missing his sheep. When the sheep saw him they abandoned me immediately and became, again, his sheep. I was relieved, of course, but I felt a tiny loneliness as my companions drifted away.

Now, 40 years later, on to more current situations. My daughter lives in Tacoma Park, the first suburb outside of DC. Tacoma Park is home to many liberal government workers as well as a big herd of deer. The government types hardly know what to do with these deer because the deer stop traffic, eat up the gardens, and poop on the lawns. This same thing happens in many of the close suburbs of DC as

well as Rock Creek Park in the middle of the city. There are accidents, gardens are ruined, poop is a hazard and no one seems to have decided what to do, if anything. So, the deer stay near to the seat of our government and, presumably, multiply.

I have a friend who has a summer house on a little island off the coast of New Hampshire. Somehow, deer had taken up residence on this island. How they got there no one knew but they were propagating, eating all the vegetation and pooping everywhere. The residents decided that they were a nuisance and would have to be removed. So, the residents had the whole herd killed and thought that was the end of it. But, the next spring people on the island began to report sightings of a few deer and the whole thing started over again. Nobody learned anything, not the deer nor the residents, but the people were very reluctant to start the killings all over again.

Together these four little stories illustrate the situation before us as we are driven into ever more intimate contact with creatures of the wild. There is a great beauty in those contacts but there are more and more of us humans requiring ever more space and resources to even live. This means that we are often competing with animals as they, like us, seek space, shelter, and food. Our expanding population also means that we are expanding our uses of animals for food, driving us to kill whole categories of animals, sometimes in shocking and inhumane ways, so that we might live. Just think of what you know about how cattle are butchered for beef, how chickens are raised without being able to move so as to produce more breast meat, etc. etc. I can hardly bear to go into the details. Further, it means that in our efforts to obtain maximum results from the food crops we plant for ourselves and our animals, we often spray insecticides. Many of these are toxic to bees, for example, and, as a result, the bee population of the world is dropping dramatically. The long term effect of this for either the bees or for us is not yet known.

At the same time we are learning more and more about animals. We know quite a lot about our pets and our various farm animals. But, in a book called Soul of An Octopus the author writes about his growing acquaintance with an octopus and the mutual understanding and affection that developed between them. Amazingly, this is not the only book on that subject nor is the author the only person to have made friends with an octopus. In another book called Mama's Last Hug the author reviews a huge amount of research that documents an array of emotions in various animals – emotions such as empathy, disgust, embarrassment, and shame – emotions, just like ours, that we did not imagine animals could hold. These discoveries and many others like them, have changed the ways in which we do research on animals. In time, they will change our estimate of the animal world and the ways in which the animal world and our world intersect. We may have to see it more like the way that it is represented in the scriptures that Dennis read. I'll read a bit of them again...

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind” and it was so.

God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

We have been enjoying and using the animals of our world ever since. But now, with the expansion of human population and, may I say, the shrinking of habitable land due to global warming, there are questions that arise. How about pets? Should we keep them? Can we afford to care for them properly? How about meat? What do we need to do to produce that protein and to distribute it equitably? Or, should we stop eating it altogether? If we don't want to think about meat, how about grain? What do we have to do to produce as much as possible and, again, to distribute it equally? These are large policy questions that include climate change issues, sovereignty issues, and basic

survival issues. As individuals we currently have only minimal power to answer them. We can stop eating meat. We can grow our own gardens and not use poisonous insecticides. We can keep honey bees. But, for most of us, most of the time, maybe our best response is to just take a little walk - no big expedition, no big hike, no posters or demonstrations-- and notice what we see of the animal kingdom – do we see birds? Do we hear their songs? Do we see squirrels, rabbits, or woodchucks? Or, maybe we can just sit quietly in our back yards for a few moments and savor what is happening in the tiny animal kingdom around us. And, maybe, while we are there, we can think a prayer of gratitude and hope, hope that all that we observe and love will still be there for our children and our grandchildren in the years to come.