

All Dogs Go To Heaven
Lynda Sutherland
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You know what they say about Unitarian Universalists, don't you? We're the folks who have questions for your answers. So in good UU fashion, I'm going to begin by asking some questions.

Do dogs go to heaven? Do ALL dogs go to heaven? What if they don't believe in heaven?

Now listen closely, because I have the answer. No, really, I do.

No, really, I don't. And that's OK. We UUs don't come to church to be told "the answers," but rather, to sit with the questions, to roll them around in our minds and look at all the fascinating sides of them, only to discover new questions hiding just behind them. We come to try on possible answers to our questions, to see how they fit for us. ... and maybe to come away feeling closer and more fond of our questions than ever. Maybe we've even picked up a few more questions to keep our questions company.

Why ask the question, then? Don't people go to church to find answers, to find out what to believe? Well, that's generally not why people come to a UU church.

We come here to go *beyond belief*, to sit with questions. We ask hard even unanswerable questions in church so we can expand our thinking. Explore the meanings of the words we use. See things in a new light, combine ideas we never thought might go together, expand our view of the world, or the universe. To dwell in possibility together, for a while.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is what we describe as a "living tradition." That means we draw nourishment and inspiration from the wisdom and symbols of many religious traditions, and find for ourselves what rings true as we learn and grow in our own understanding of the world. So let's take a look at some different religious beliefs about a dog's afterlife.

For Christians, death is not the end between human and pet relationship. 92% of Christians believe dogs become pet angels.

Islam teaches that all beings have souls and that all souls are eternal, including animal souls.

Buddhists believe that humans and animals can be reborn in either form and consider both to be sentient beings. So, according to Buddhism, your pet has a soul just as much as you do. It's even possible that you could be reborn as a dog, and your dog as a human.

Like Buddhists, Hindus believe in the form of reincarnation, rather than in heaven and hell. They believe that animals do have souls, but think that these souls eventually become human to move closer to God. So, according to Hinduism, your dog might eventually be reborn as a human after death.

It's not been agreed whether or not heaven and hell exist in Judaism, which makes it difficult to say whether or not dogs could go there. However, Jews do believe that animals have souls.

Some people believe in a Spirit World, a place where the spirits of souls of those who have died exist and can sometimes even communicate with us. Have you ever had a pet pass on, and felt that you could sense their 'spirit' around your home, even after they were gone?

Many people believe that pets continue to live with us in the spirit world after they've passed on, which could explain the visions and messages some people claim to receive after a pet dies. (<http://pawcastle.com/do-dogs-go-to-heaven/>)

So there are a lot of people who feel that if there is a heaven or spirit world, dogs belong there.

But even if dogs and other animals have spirits, does that mean they can be spiritual? Psychologist Mary Lou Randour tells this story in her article, "Animals Teach Us Spirituality and Heighten Our Capacity for Love and Joy:"

I once took a yoga class while visiting my sister in Sarasota, Florida, in a beautiful studio with floor-to-ceiling windows. As the class was engaged in exercise, we noticed a dog standing outside the window, innocently looking in. The dog seemed curious, and wagged his tail in a relaxed motion. Soon, he was joined by another dog, who also watched us through the window. Occasionally one or the other would bark -- not a loud bark, but a "here I am" kind of bark. For the entire hour-and-a-half session they stood there, noses to the glass, looking in with interest. They seemed calm, but intensely attentive, and clearly interested in joining us.

One could assign any number of explanations to their absorbed interest. I think, as did others in the class, that they picked up on some kind of "positive energy" generated by our collective yoga practice. I put quotes around "positive energy" because I don't have precise language to describe what I think the dogs sensed. And that is the point. They were able to perceive, and experience, something some of us are dimly aware of and would like to understand, but cannot find words to describe. Animals can teach us to live outside of words, to listen to other forms of consciousness, to tune into other rhythms.

Quite simply, animals teach us about love: how to love, how to enjoy being loved, how loving itself is an activity that generates more love, radiating out and encompassing an ever larger circle of others. Animals propel us into an "economy of abundance." They teach us the language of the spirit. (<https://innerself.com/content/living/home-and-garden/pets-you/5790-animals-teach-us-spirituality.html>)

Animals, by their nature, can help us get rid of our stress energy. They are like spiritual cleaning ladies who come into our consciousness and mop up the spills the emotional turmoil of the day

leaves behind. Just looking into their eyes, petting them, or even having a pet sleep in your lap or at your feet, can calm our troubled spirits. Studies show that people with a pet recover faster from an operation, or that elderly pet owners live longer, healthier lives than non-pet owners.

Many people can attest to the spiritual benefit a dog or other loved pet can provide. In the book *Always by My Side: Life Lessons from Millie and All the Dogs I've Loved*, Edward Grinnan writes, "The physically blind use Seeing Eye dogs to navigate their lives. But there are those of us who have been blind spiritually and emotionally, and who have discovered that a dog can help lead us into the light." He talks about his life with his Golden Retriever, Millie, and how her unconditional love for him helped him overcome alcohol addiction and depression.

But what about their spiritual lives? Do animals, themselves, have a spiritual life? Do animals marvel at their surroundings, have a sense of awe when they see a rainbow, find themselves by a waterfall, or ponder their environs? Do they ask where does lightning come from? Do they go into a "zone" when they play with others, forgetting about everything else save for the joy of playing? What are they feeling when they perform funeral rituals, as elephants do?

Jane Goodall (2005. *Primate spirituality*. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. edited by B. Taylor. Thoemmes Continuum, New York), a scientist who has studied chimpanzees in the wild for over 40 years, has observed that sometimes a chimpanzee, usually an adult male, will dance at a waterfall with total abandon. She wonders whether these dances are indicative of religious behavior, precursors of religious ritual. She describes a chimpanzee approaching one of these falls with slightly bristled hair, a sign of heightened arousal.

"As he gets closer, and the roar of the falling water gets louder, his pace quickens, his hair becomes fully erect, and upon reaching the stream he may perform a magnificent display close to the foot of the falls. Standing upright, he sways rhythmically from foot to foot, stamping in the shallow, rushing water, picking up and hurling great rocks. Sometimes he climbs up the slender vines that hang down from the trees high above and swings out into the spray of the falling water. This 'waterfall dance' may last ten or fifteen minutes."

Chimpanzees also dance at the onset of heavy rains and during violent gusts of wind. Goodall asks, "Is it not possible that these performances are stimulated by feelings akin to wonder and awe? After a waterfall display the performer may sit on a rock, his eyes following the falling water. What is it, this water?"

Goodall admits that she'd love to get into their minds even for a few moments. It would be worth years of research, she says, to discover what animals see and feel when they look at the stars. At the Mona Foundation's chimpanzee sanctuary near Girona, Spain, a rescued chimpanzee named Marco, does a dance during thunderstorms during which he looks like he is in a trance. Goodall has suggested that some of those chimpanzees may even have entered trance states similar to those experienced by human religious worshipers.

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/animal-emotions/200911/do-animals-have-spiritual-experiences-yes-they-do>)

Because animals can't use words to describe what they are feeling and thinking, we can't say for sure that they have what we would call spiritual experiences. But scientists are finding evidence that it is at least *possible*. One such scientist is Kevin Nelson, a professor of neurology

at the University of Kentucky. He thinks it is possible that dogs may go through near-death experiences, have mystical experiences, and feel the bliss that some people have associated with religious happenings.

Can animals have spiritual experiences?

Two prominent professors, neurologist Kevin Nelson (University of Kentucky) and ecologist Marc Bekoff (University of Colorado - Boulder), have recently caused a stir by suggesting that the presence of the limbic system in animals implies that they, too, are capable of religious experiences. They might be struck with sudden overwhelming impressions of oneness and mystical unity, for example, or with joy, wonderment, and dislocation in time. The assertions go further: since out-of-body and near-death experiences are assumed to be caused by physiological functions shared by both humans and animals, there's no reason to think that animals don't also see a light at the end of a tunnel when their time comes.

"Perhaps numerous animals engage in these rituals, but we haven't been lucky enough to see them," Bekoff wrote in a Psychology Today report.

"For now, let's keep the door open to the idea that animals can be spiritual beings and let's consider the evidence for such a claim," he added. (<https://www.ibcsr.org/index.php/institute-research-portals/quantifying-religious-experience-project/528-can-animals-have-spiritual-experiences>)

Spirituality Health's blog has a few suggestions for ways to connect with a dog on a deeper level. These suggestions apply to cats, horses, and other animals, too.

1. **Say nice things.** Researcher Gregory Burns has been working with MRIs to figure out what parts of a dog's brain lights up, based on food or rewards. His work showed that dogs responded the same to hot dogs and praise—here we thought they were all about the kibble!—and 20 percent of dogs actually responded more favorably to praise alone. So talk Fido up; he'll love it and you'll enjoy the positive loop, too.
2. **Gaze at your dog.** According to the website Dogtime, dogs and humans are flooded with the feel-good hormone oxytocin when they look into each other's eyes.
3. **Chant with your dog.** We often share our love of nature with dogs by taking them to the beach with us, on hikes or on rambles through the woods. Why not introduce them to our spiritual side? Invite your dog into the room as you do your morning chanting, or play spiritual music in your dog's presence. Look up dogs doing yoga with their people for some fun video ideas on YouTube.
4. **Share your bedroom with your dog.** A new study from the Mayo Clinic found that people sleep better and have a greater sense of security and comfort if they sleep with their pets. However, you'll probably sleep better if you keep your dog off to the side in a separate dog bed, rather than under your own covers.
5. **Volunteer together.** Share the love you feel by visiting a nursing home or hospital via a visiting dog program. Your dog will be showered with affection and feel useful—and you'll both feel great.

<https://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/2017/09/18/5-ways-to-bond-with-your-pooch>

Not all of us want to or are able to have animal companions in our lives. I often visit people with a pet and get my pet hunger filled that way. I'm thankful that the world is so full of amazing creatures that make up the Web of Life of which we are a part. When we open our minds and hearts to this intricate web of existence, we realize how blessed we are by all the connections, physical *and* spiritual, between the abundant variety of creatures on the Earth. May the spirituality of dogs – and cats, parrots, hedge hogs, and other creatures – continue to bless and inspire us, and may we in turn prove to be a blessing to them.

Amen and Blessed Be.