

**What Is It Like To Be a Bat?**  
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**December 28, 2014**

Let's pretend.

From a very young age, kids love these words. My two year old niece can hardly speak, but loves to pretend to be a bear, which in her opinion makes the sound: Beeeear. What's it like to be a bear or a crab or a bird? For the child, the answer is as simple as making a few noises and hand motions.

Some of our own strongest memories of childhood revolve around pretending to be something we were not. For my wife Aaryn, one of those memories was that of pretending to be a bat, around the age of eight. Now, she loved bats, finding them to be pretty awesome with their echolocation and evening skyward journeys. She also thought they were cute, with their teddy bear like faces surrounded by natural leather coats. But most of all, she liked how they would sleep upside down. This was a nifty feature of the bat, and on the day that Aaryn decided to BE a bat, she was wondering what it would be like for one's bed to be a resting place for one's feet, rather than for one's head. But more importantly, she saw the obvious utility of this sleeping strategy for the poking of younger sisters, one of whom slept conveniently on the lower part of their shared bunkbed. The day Aaryn decided to be a bat stands out seared in her memory, however, because of the inconvenient fact that eight year old human feet are not designed to hook onto the sides of beds. She didn't learn what it is like to be a bat, but she did learn what it is like to drop face first onto the floor of the bedroom from the height of four feet.

But as we grow up, it becomes much more difficult to know what it must be like to be a bat. Philosopher Thomas Nagel, a fully developed adult intellect with many years of training in academic philosophy, suggests that not only is this difficult to know, it is impossible. Whatever we might know about the anatomy of a bat, the natural history of the bat, the aesthetics of the bat, we can never get inside the head of the bat and know what it's like to be a bat from the inside. We can describe how a bat mechanically processes information from its surroundings through echolocation, but what is it like to *see* the world in this way? Is it like infrared vision, or a blaring rock concert, or something entirely alien to human experience? What's it like to sleep upside down? Probably, for the bat, it would be just as strange that we sleep horizontal to the ground. I doubt the bat, if it has the capacity for imagination, could imagine sleeping any other way. No matter how much scientific data we can gather on the bat, no matter how much knowledge we have about it, we don't know what it's like to *be* a bat—from the inside.

The child-like faith that all one really needs to do to understand the inner life of a bat is to flip upside down at bedtime gives way in time and with thought to a suspicion that we can know pretty much nothing about another creature's inner experience. This applies not just to bats and birds and crabs but to other people as well. We can never really get inside the minds of even those closest to us, which is why marriage counselors and divorce lawyers keep employed, and why the parenting section of the bookstore continues to grow. And if we cannot understand the inner life of our partners and our children, then how can we expect to perform this feat in regards to those we do not know personally? We don't know what it's like to be a bat, and we don't know what

it's like to be a poor person of color in Furgeson, Missouri. We don't know what it's like to be bird, but we also don't know what it's like to be someone else's child in Baghdad or Somalia. Certainly none of us know what it's like to be a billionaire one-percenter living in New York City. But living responsibly in the world requires us to think about these things.

We need to play a game of let's pretend again. We need that childlike wonder which sees becoming a lion or an antelope as a simple matter of perspective and a little bit of playful effort.

But as adults we suspect that we are trying to find a feeling of real connection where connection is impossible. We feel a longing to once again know the animals as our siblings and the stars as our parents, and we need some grounding in fact for our experience of connection with them.

What we seek is to return to a sense of wonder at the kinship of all life, that sense that we are at home in the universe.

There are many paths to this sense. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, our Transcendentalist forebears found themselves overcome by the sensations of being in the woods, in nature, away from human constructions of any kind. In Nature they could find themselves intuiting a unity and purpose to the world which was reflected in their own souls.

They restated in naturalistic and democratic language a common belief throughout the history of religion which sees the human being as a microcosm that reflects the truths of the macrocosm. We embody the forces and

processes of nature, and nature reflects the struggles and aspirations of our souls. The universe is to be found within the human mind, and the human mind is to be understood by understanding the universe. The world then is not an impersonal or different Other, but a faithful companion. A sense of separation from the world is entirely an artificial creation of culture. All we need to do to recover a sense of kinship with nature is to step out into a crisp fall day, and listen to the gentle rustling of the wind as it blows Truth over and through us. If God is our highest values and our deepest selves, then we will find that God reflected in the Universe which reflects ourselves back to us in a million splendid forms.

Emerson wrote:

"All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. Therefore is nature glorious with form, color, and motion, that every globe in the remotest heaven; every chemical change from the rudest crystal up to the laws of life; every change of vegetation from the first principle of growth in the eye of a leaf, to the tropical forest and antediluvian coal-mine; every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments."

Mystics in most religious traditions would agree, although they might use different words. What we find out there, and what we find in here are supposed to correspond. We know it, we feel it, and as children we lived it through our play.

But the reason we find it so hard to accept this viewpoint in our modern world is that we know that the moral order

and the world of nature do not match. We value morality, but in nature we see that it took millions of years of horrible animal suffering to bring us into being. We treasure compassion, but nature is indifferent and has no problem taking those we love without a second thought. Humans bring a level of creativity and possibility and a depth of feeling to the universe that is truly novel and unusual, but the mechanistic and impersonal processes of the physical world seem to have nothing to do with our rich inner lives.

Macrocosm and microcosm do not always match one another, and Emerson's belief that one could see the moral law written large in the woods seems somewhat outdated, as does his reduction of morality to the Ten Commandments. Still, when I look out at the Universe I see many reasons to believe that a bat and I have a lot in common, and that our World is a place where we are truly at home.

We are, quite literally, kin with all life on Earth. According to the epic of Evolution, your cat or dog is not just a "family member" in some sentimental metaphorical sense, but an actual cousin, descended from a common mammalian ancestor. We're kin with the bats, and more distantly with the birds, and even more distantly with the leech and the ebola virus. In the end we can all trace our ancestry back to the same primordial RNA world, and therefore we are all a part of each other's stories.

We then face similar challenges and are driven by similar goals.

We all are faced with an ambiguous and changing world. We all are faced with confusion and suffering, but also moments of great aliveness that justify our existence.

What it's like to be a bat is to have marvelous days when the air shimmers with the vibrations of crickets in the fall and one finds a flower filled with nectar so sweet that you think you may never need to eat again. It is to soar through the crisp night air with one's fellows, glorying in aliveness. In this experience, you might forget for a moment that there's a parasite eating off your foot, and that you had a spat with another bat last night which left a nasty mark on your cheek.

Likewise to be human is to worship the Holy you cannot name while your heart breaks for a relationship which is ending. It's to experience deep absorption in a task which lets you forget the doctor's diagnosis.

The universe is ambiguous and indifferent, full of contradictions and conflicts and confusions, but it is the setting for a story we share with all life, with every single member of the vast extended family that populates this planet. We aren't alone in this madcap adventure. We're all in it together, sharing the exciting, creative, yet painful and shifting Spirit of Life.

This is that common Spirit of Life which children experience when they pretend to soar like a bird or run from a tiger or pick something up with an elephant's trunk. This common Spirit is our heritage as members of the tree of life and our legacy for life to come. It's our key to re-enchant the world.

When it is big and whole and free enough, it's easy for our sense of connection to spill out of our planet into all that exists. It makes it easy to see ourselves as stardust, connected deeply to the story of the evolving universe, a universe in which we and our whole family here on Earth might just be at home after all.

This perspective on life has long been spoken of by mystics. The Christian saint Hildegard of Bingen wrote:

I am that great and fiery force  
sparkling in every thing that lives;  
in shining of the river's course,  
in greening grass that glory gives.

I shine in glitter on the seas,  
in burning sun, in moon and stars.  
In unseen wind, in verdant trees  
I breathe within, both near and far.

And where I breathe there is no death,  
and meadows glow with beauties rife.  
I am in all, the spirit's breath,  
the thundered word, for I am Life

I invite you then this week to spend some time pretending, as a spiritual practice. Imagine what it would be like to go through life as a pet. Think through what it must have been like to experience your partner's day in all its details. Daydream about what it must be like to be a bat or an aardvark or a comet. You are never alone, but live on a planet full to the brim with kin of all kinds. This is the good news brought by the mystics of all faiths: that if we are willing we can see the universe through the eyes of the Spirit of Life which is within us, around us and among us all. Amen, and Blessed Be.