

“Animal Blessing”
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Reading: “The Truth About Turtles” by Shel Silverstein

Turtles really have long legs,
But they don't stretch 'em out
Until it's very late at night,
And then they run about,
Racin' over hill and field,
Until mornin' comes—and then
They curl 'em back inside their shells
And crawl around again.

Message: “Torty the Tortoise”

Well, I can't tell you if turtles really have secret lives or not. I don't know if they go “racin' over hill and field, until mornin' comes—and then they curl 'em back inside their shells.” But I have recently learned a thing or two about tortoises since one has lived with me for about the past year.

For instance, turtles and tortoises are not the same thing. They are both reptiles with shells but the basic difference between them is that turtles live in water and tortoises live on land. There is also a similar animal called a terrapin, which is sort of a combination of a turtle and tortoise.

I'll be real, though. I wasn't so sure about my new roommate Torty at first. About a week before he came into my life, my partner and I had the following conversation:

Amy: What do you think about my buying a tortoise from Craigslist?

Me: Please don't do that.

Subject closed. What more was there to say?

A few days later, Amy went out to run an errand, and returned with a small cardboard box. It had handles and holes poked in the top, almost like a carrying case for a pet. Amy either has good luck or great planning because when she and Torty came home, I happened to be meeting on our front porch with the then-president of our Fellowship. The thing about

ministers is that we try to avoid snapping at our spouses in front of the presidents of the congregations we serve. "Oh," I said, in what I hoped might approximate a pleasant tone of voice, "I guess you decided to go for it!"

That was about a year ago and Tarty has proved to be surprisingly companionable. For starters, we are more alike, he and I, than you might think. Here are things that I have discovered Tarty and I have in common: we both enjoy a nice ripe strawberry and some organic Farm Market spinach. We both love to swim, although I tend to favor the pool at the Y, whereas Tarty fits happily in the bathroom sink.

Even better than sharing common interests, Tarty's blessing has been that learning about him has helped me learn about myself. And I'm not only talking about the superficial stuff, like my enjoyment of berries, greens or taking a dip in the water.

I can be a little resistant to change, like the idea of getting a reptile roomie. Sometimes, like when I am not sure how I feel about a change, my default setting can be suspicion and avoidance. I was a little suspicious of Tarty and so I avoided him.

That grew harder the week Amy went out of town and I had to supply the food and water. Well, at least he was an interesting little creature. And he was stuck inside all day and the weather was really quite nice, after all. I decided to take him on an outing to the backyard. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship...

Over time I've become convinced that Tarty actually sports a pretty great personality. Consider the evidence; his home is in the room in my house where we keep the TV and it's clear from his efforts to peek over the wall of his enclosure that he loves reruns of *Friends* as much as I do! Once, when the mood was a little dour and needed lightening up, he kindly obliged by peeing all over Amy. Good Tarty!

In these and other ways, Tarty has showed me how wrong I was to assume that he would need care but not contribute in any way to the family culture. In fact, just this last week he set the tone for our whole evening by scurrying across the backyard so quickly that we didn't notice and hiding in the woefully overgrown ferns so completely that we let dinner burn and a diaper go unchanged while we frantically called neighborhood friends to help us hunt for hours before locating him. Not to brag, but I found him.

Having a non-human being around who's so different from me and whose needs and habits are so different than my own has turned out to be a funny way of keeping me a little more flexible than I think I would otherwise be. He is a reminder that going with the flow ("Oh, I guess you decided to go for it!") keeps me learning, experiencing, observing, wondering and enjoying.

These are just some of the ways that this one animal blesses my life every day. I hope that during Congregational Response some of you might be willing to share how animals bless your life.