

For Faunal Friends No Longer With Us: Creating an Animal Remembrance Garden

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Introduction

The year 2011 marks a personal milestone; I have been employed in animal care for 30 years now. Reflecting on this time, I'm struck by how humans enjoy a longevity not experienced by most animals. It is poignant for me to consider that the majority of the animals I first took care of back in 1981 are long gone. You who are young and have not been in this profession for as long as me may wonder if it ever gets any easier dealing with the death of an animal you treasured and cared for. It does not.

My curator, Cindy Horton, shares my passion for animals, and like any great leader, she challenges her staff to give vigorous effort toward special projects. And so it was that in 2010 Cindy suggested to me that I build a little garden as a tribute to the animals of the Farmyard at Stone Mountain Park that are no longer with us. This article chronicles my inspirations and efforts to create the garden. Inevitably, it contains a great deal of specific and personal thoughts, but I will share these so that anyone who wishes to create his or her own animal remembrance garden might gather some insight to use in such a project.

Concept and Design

The site Cindy suggested for the garden could not have been more unassuming; it was a vacant piece of weedy land between the paved service drive to our barn and the long wooden ramp leading to our dumpster. This area is out of public view, but this was to be a personal garden for the keepers rather than a display for visitors. This freed me from some aesthetic concerns. Still, how could I fashion an intimate garden in such an ordinary spot?

My first decision was one that might make a landscape architect or garden designer cringe. I would not commit anything to paper; I would simply gather elements for the garden and arrange them as seemed fitting. While a carefully crafted site plan is a sound idea for any design—and absolutely essential for any large project—I reasoned that for a small project like this I could just arrange details by eye, striving for balance and sensitivity.

To gather some inspiration on how to proceed, I recalled how back when I studied landscape we were taught the wisdom of a few lines of Alexander Pope's 1731 poem "Epistle to Lord Burlington" (Epistle IV)

"Consult the genius of the place in all;
That tells the waters or to rise, or fall;
Or helps th' ambitious hill the heav'ns to scale,
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades..."

By "genius of the place," Pope means the spirit of the place, also called the *genus loci* from the Latin (Hunt 1992: 229).

So what did the spirit of the place tell me as I began my project? The ground was gently sloped, so I thought I'd design the garden to be ascended, with its entrance at the lowest elevation and focal point at the highest spot. There were also three elements of the site that obviously would have to stay, whatever my design was. First, there was a fine old shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*) with a trunk 1 ft. 1 in. in diameter. Second, there were two stumps remaining from even bigger trees; the more prominent one was 2 ft. 4 in. in diameter and rose 4 in. above the ground. Finally, there was a 12 ft. high nonfunctioning light pole. All these would have to somehow be incorporated into the design. (Here and throughout, English units are used instead of metric; while metric is appropriate for a scientific paper, this is an article about gardens and American landscape designers use feet instead of meters.)

But what spirit of the place could inspire me if I thought beyond the confines of the proposed garden spot? The Farmyard sits in Stone Mountain Park. Its centerpiece, Stone Mountain, is a massive granite monadnock. Granite was quarried from one portion of the mountain from the late nineteenth century until 1978 (Stephen & Mirza 2011:67). From my explorations around the Park, I knew there was a place where a large number of rocks remaining from the quarrying operations had been dumped. When I returned to the pile for a thorough investigation, I saw that there were mostly rocks in a natural state, uneven on all sides. There were, however, also some rocks with flat surfaces, created by having been lifted out of the vast bed of granite by the stonecutting process.

Presently, a simple design for the Animal Remembrance Garden occurred to me. I would use irregularly shaped granite rocks to make a ring. Within the ring I'd set some flat surfaced granite slabs; upon these I'd write inscriptions from poems that would serve to remind my co-workers and me of the wonderful feelings our animals give us. I'd acquire a few plants to place between the inscription rocks—Cindy suggested rosebushes—and then I'd cover the entire garden with a unifying layer of pine straw as mulch. The result would be quite simple, but I hoped it would also be memorable.

Step one of the execution of the design was to pull up all the unkempt herbaceous growth in the site. I cleared out everything except two young trees that I retained in the garden—a loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) and a post oak (*Quercus stellata*). The pine stands at the entrance to the garden, while the oak sits beside the big stump at the uphill end of the garden. I transplanted a second small post oak so that the stump was flanked by matching trees.

The next step was to lay out the outer dimensions of the garden and set out the surrounding ring of rocks. Why the ring of rocks forming the garden's borders? As Robert Pogue Harrison notes, "It is primarily a garden's perimeter that sets it apart, that gives shape and definition to its living form... A garden is literally defined by its boundaries" (Harrison 2008: 56). The boundaries need not be a tall fence or wall; a surface one-quarter of an inch high can define the space around it (Walker & Blake 1990: 124).

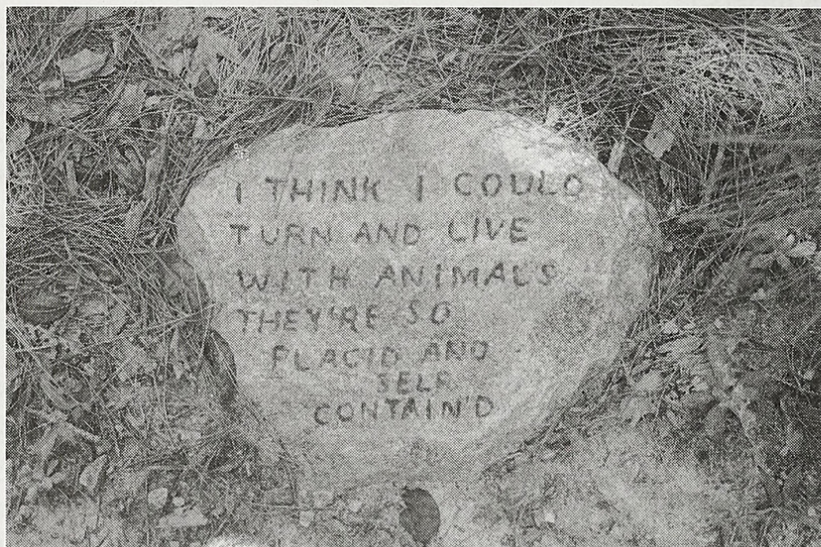
Thus, the boundary of the Animal Remembrance Garden is clearly delineated by 36 rocks, ranging from 6 in. to 1 ft. 8 in. long, while the resulting enclosed space measures approximately 21 feet by 16 feet. The boundary rocks are buried so that none of them juts more than 5 in. above the surface of the ground. Having rocks partially buried is a characteristic of Japanese gardens (Seike, et. al 1980: 43). Indeed, the simplicity of the entire arrangement I settled on has something of a Zen feeling to it.

There are four inscription rocks strategically placed inside the ring. The practice of including inscribed tributes to animals in a landscape is rather old, as two examples from 18th century English gardens demonstrate. The gardens at Rousham feature—at the feet of a statue of Venus, no less—a plaque lamenting the passing of "an otter hound of extraordinary sagacity" named Ringwood (Moore, et. al 1988: 134). At the gardens of Stowe stands a structure called "The Temple of British Worthies;" the rear of this edifice has a memorial to a greyhound named Signor Fido (Hunt 1992: 84).

Expense made carving inscriptions into the rocks in the Animal Remembrance Garden out of the question. I'd have to use a permanent marker, which no matter how boldly drawn would need to be reapplied regularly. At times the transient nature of my inscriptions has troubled me, but when it does I find comfort in Robert Harrison's advice that "apart from a few lofty exceptions, (gardens) do not exist to immortalize their makers or defy the ravages of time. If anything they exist to reenchant the present" (Harrison 2008: 39).

The first inscribed rock stands apart from the other three; it is beside the little pine at the garden's entrance. On this flat stone I've set down perhaps my favorite animal imagery line from a poem.

It is the opening line to stanza 32 of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd..." When I studied American poetry in college, the professor emphasized Whitman's significance, arguing persuasively that the 1855 publication of that poet's *Leaves of Grass*—the collection which included "Song of Myself" was a literary milestone. You can read the entire poem at Princeton University's website: princeton.edu/~batke/logr/log_026.html.



If you do examine the poem, you will note the appearance of a number of animals. Although I didn't use the opening words of stanza 14 on any of my rocks, I want to mention those lines in passing as they are the most soothing animal image I've ever encountered:

*The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,
Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.*

The Animal Remembrance Garden's other three inscribed slabs are arranged in a semicircle at the high end of the site in an alternating pattern with four red flowered "Knock Out" rosebushes (*Rosa 'Radtko'*). The left rock has lines from Carl Sandburg's fun 1918 poem "Wilderness." This is a work that speaks especially forcefully for zoo keepers; you may enjoy the complete poem at poetryfoundation.org/poem/238490. From this menagerie of animal imagery, I selected these words for the left slab: "And the mockingbird... warbles in the underbrush of my Chattanooga of hope." This was a very personal choice. I was born in Chicago and raised there in a beautiful Victorian home that sat just one block away from a similar home where Carl Sandburg had once lived. While I spent my boyhood in Chicago, I've spent my adulthood in the South and I've come to love the region. Because of my background, I find that the southern imagery of the mockingbird and the "Chattanooga of hope"—penned by a poet who also lived in and wrote poems about Chicago—to be quite charming.

Upon the center rock is an inscription from William Blake's "The Lamb." Blake was a late 18th century English poet who is probably better known for his verse about tigers than sheep ("Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright/ In the forests of the night/ What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy



fearful symmetry?"). Blake's poem "The Lamb" can be read at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172926>. I choose these lines to inscribe: "Softest clothing, wooly, bright; / Gave thee such a tender voice, /... Little Lamb, who made thee?" We have a dozen sheep in the Farmyard, and naturally they baa loudly in the morning when they want to go out of the barn and also in the evening when they want to come back in. Inclusion of a poem acknowledging their "tender voices" seemed obvious!

I should clarify that with all the

inscriptions I had to be a rough editor, excising particular words or lines simply so that I could fit passages I wanted onto each granite slab.

Finally, on the rightmost stone in the group of three inscribed slabs, are lines from "The Heaven of Animals" by James Dickey. The complete poem may be read at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171425>. The rock containing Dickey's words sits at the base of the old shortleaf pine, and for that reason I thought the appropriate lines to inscribe were: "Under such trees in full knowledge/ Of what is in glory above them,/ And to feel no fear..." Since the Animal Remembrance Garden acknowledges animals in their ultimate state of rest, it is comforting for me to imagine them also in a state where they can feel no fear. And once again, I have a personal connection. I heard the late Mr. Dickey at a poetry reading, circa 1980, when I was an undergraduate majoring in zoology and minoring in English. I wrote a paper on "The Heaven of Animals" in my modern American poetry class for which, I recall, I only received a C. (Perhaps I simply wasn't as inspired back then.) One other connection exists here; that of the poet to the place, for Dickey was born in nearby Atlanta in 1923. Appropriately enough, his birth was on February 2nd—Groundhog Day (Untermeyer 1969: 691).

After looking at the inscriptions, one of my colleagues made a suggestion. Why not also write the names of the animal friends we've lost on the ring of rocks around the garden? It was a wonderful idea, and so upon those rocks I wrote "Max" (a sheep), "Clover" (a goat), Dee Dee (a pig) and so forth.

I planted a trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) at the base of the defunct light pole that now grows up and around. With luck the vine might begin to bloom next year.

After all this, something still seemed missing. The high end of the garden, with the big stump and the inscribed slabs and rosebushes in the semicircle in front of it, still needed a distinctive focal point. So I added a birdbath. Given the personal commitment I'd made to the garden, however, it simply wouldn't do to buy a premade unit. So I constructed a handmade birdbath. I first made a stand by anchoring a stout wooden 24 in. long piece of landscape timber into the stump with rebar. Then I simply hammered a platform on top of the stand, fastened a 14 in. wide epoxy saucer in place





atop the platform, and inserted a 12 in. wide epoxy saucer into the larger one as the bath itself. (The saucers I speak of are the type designed to place under flowerpots.) The birdbath is commonly visited by Eastern phoebes (*Sayornis phoebe*), American robins (*Turdus migratorius*), Carolina wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*), Eastern towhees (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*), Northern cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*), and tufted titmice (*Baeolophus bicolor*). The two small post oaks flanking the stump are

perfect perches for the birds as they hop on and off the birdbath.

Conclusion

Several weeks after I finished the work, Cindy surprised me by announcing to the staff that we would hold a small dedication ceremony for the Animal Remembrance Garden. When we gathered, Cindy spoke eloquently about what animals mean to us—and to the people who visit the Farmyard. She reminded us that the animals that have died at the Farmyard live on not only in the memories of the keepers who care for them, but also in dozens of photographs taken by our guests. Certainly there must be many parents who treasure a photo of their child petting one of our goats, sheep or pigs. And so, the warm memories of the few of us who provide care for our animals are shared by the many who visit our animals.

I emphasized in the introduction that the design concept and execution of the Farmyard's Animal Remembrance Garden was quite personal. But the pleasure of taking care of animals, the unhappiness when they die, and the fond memories of them after the grieving has passed are, I hope, universal among zookeepers. So while my efforts may not match what you would strive for in a garden to your departed animals, I hope I have helped you imagine ideas if you choose to undertake such a project. Maybe you would like to set up a vegetable garden, or a browse garden, that reminds you of a special departed animal because it includes produce or foliage the animal relished. Perhaps you might fashion a garden featuring plants with animal-related names—tiger lilies or leopard plants, for instance. Bird keepers might strive for a garden as colorful as the birds that inspired it. The possibilities are numerous, and to further inspire your efforts, let me quote several lines from the introduction of *The Meaning of Gardens*, a wonderful collection of essays on the powerful hold gardens have on human imagination:

"Gardens have special meaning. They are powerful settings for human life, transcending time, place, and culture. Gardens are mirrors of ourselves, reflections of sensual and personal experience. By making gardens, using or admiring them, and dreaming of them, we create our own idealized order of nature and culture... Since the beginning of human time, we have expressed ourselves through the gardens we have made." (Francis & Hester, 1990: 2).

Acknowledgments

I wish to dedicate this article to my mother, Anne Elizabeth Bannor, who passed away while I was writing it. Since we lived in different cities, we corresponded regularly—often discussing books we'd read-- and in my final letter to her before her death, I shared thoughts about Robert Harrison's *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*. I have referred to that book in this article, and I knew it was one Mom would have enjoyed reading if only she had had more time. In a chapter entitled "On the Lost Art of Seeing," Harrison wrote with obvious concern "(N)othing is less cultivated these days in Western societies than the art of seeing. It is fair to say that there exists in our era a tragic discrepancy between the staggering richness of the visible world and the extreme poverty of our capacity to perceive it (p. 114)." I had the fortune to be blessed with a mother who opened my eyes to the richness of the visible world in more ways than I can now count; writing this piece on the Animal Remembrance Garden was a small way of showing Mom my gratitude.

Also I want to thank another woman who has influenced my thinking profoundly, my curator Cindy Horton. The genesis of the Animal Remembrance Garden was a flash in her mind; she had both the generosity to share the idea with me and the faith to allow me to develop the project.

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