

More Heavenly Fables

► **By Michael Mountain**

Our work for the animals is a work of the soul.



“He would rather live in hell, he says, than abandon the dog and be in heaven.”

All the world's great cultures have legends and traditions suggesting that kindness to animals is one of the greatest of virtues.

A particularly touching one tells the story of Al-Shibili, a Sufi mystic who lived in 13th century Iraq. When he passes away and arrives at the gates of heaven, Al-Shibili comes before the Almighty, who immediately forgives all his sins and asks him if he knows the reason why.

The holy man, somewhat uncertain, runs through a list of his good works, his prayers, and his pilgrimages.

But the Almighty brushes all those things aside, and says:

“Do you remember a winter night when you were walking the streets of Baghdad, and you found a small cat made weak by the cold, creeping from wall to wall? Out of pity, you picked her up and put her inside your coat. And because of the mercy that you showed that innocent creature, I have had mercy on you.”

There are many more such tales, but my favorite is the conclusion of that great, sprawling Hindu epic, the Mahabharata.

Like the Hebrew Old Testament and other great stories of early humankind, it is a powerful, sweeping vision of good and evil, the human and the divine, passed down from generation to generation, and then written in Sanskrit 1,000 years ago.

At the core of the story are two warring families, one divine in origin, the other demonic, yet cousins to each other. As their history unfolds, so does a wealth of intricate subplots, ethical dilemmas, tales of heroism, betrayal, and cowardice, along with great tracts of wisdom and spiritual guidance – a total of over 100,000 stanzas

that were eventually accepted by the Hindu people as one of their sacred texts.

At the end of the story, with both sides exhausted from years of war, the divine family concludes that it is time to leave this world, and they embark on the Great Journey, which involves walking north toward the polar mountain (symbol of heavenly worlds beyond) until death comes.

One by one, each of the men and women dies and passes on, leaving only the youngest son, Yudisthira, and the little stray dog that has followed him all the way, and whom he has befriended.

After many years, the two of them arrive together at the gates of the heavenly world, and Yudisthira is welcomed in and told that his family awaits him. The gatekeeper asks him to leave the dog outside, explaining that he will surely find his way back to a good home and a new family.

But Yudisthira cannot leave the dog. He pleads with the gatekeeper, saying that he would rather live in hell with his faithful friend than abandon him and be in heaven.

Sadly, the gatekeeper closes the gate on both of them, and the exhausted, forlorn man turns away with the dog, back to a world of misery that holds nothing for him.

But as they walk away, the dog is suddenly transformed, revealed in his true nature as Dharma, the incarnation of Divine Truth, who is Yudisthira's own father, sent to test the young man's basic character before admitting him to heaven.

Of course, this little stray dog didn't really have to be “transformed” at all. In their faithfulness and simplicity, these innocent creatures all represent the Dharma.

And in caring for them, each of us becomes a guardian of that Divine Truth. 🐾