

“A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO PET SUNDAY”

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August 5, 2007

Reading

From “Your cats are your children” by Marge Piercy

Certain friends come in, they say
your cats are your children.
They smile from a great height on down.
Clouds roll in around their hair.
I have real children, they mean,
while you have imitation.

My cats are not my children.
I gave Morgaine away yesterday
to a little boy she liked.
I’m not saving to send them to Harvard.
When they stay out overnight
I don’t call the police.

I like the way they don’t talk,
the way they do, eyes shining
or narrowed, tails bannered,
paws kneading, cats with private
lives and passions sharp as their claws,
hunters, lovers, great sulkers.

No, my children are my friends,
my lover, my dependents on whom
I depend, those few for whom
I will rise in the night to give
comfort, massage, medicine,
whose calls I always take.

My children are my books
that I gestate for years,
a slow-witted elephant
eternally pregnant, books

that I sit on for eras like the great
auk on a vast marble egg...¹

Sermon

In the middle of last month, I decided that my sermon today would be on the Zen of Dogs. Dogs, like children, are some of the best Zen teachers out there. But when I chose the topic, I also had this nagging thought: yet another Pet Sunday about dogs. Maybe I mentioned rats once or twice when my kids had them for pets, but other than that it's been all dogs. So I had the nagging thought that maybe people who love pets besides dogs would probably like to hear about something else for once. So I guiltily took a piece of paper and scrawled on it:

Recruit "Cat People" and do panel sermon on cats!

I stuck the note in my folder of Pet Sunday ideas. Next year, I promised myself, I'll make sure cats get some attention.

That I've never devoted a Pet Sunday sermon to cats isn't surprising. I am not a Cat Person. This is why I realized when I wrote the note that I'd have to recruit others to do the sermon. I've never had much to do with cats. Honestly, I've never really liked them. Being allergic to them hasn't helped. Somehow cats seem to sense my indifference (at best): when I visit houses with cats, they always seem to want to climb all over me. I generally freeze up and hope they'll go away, which they don't.

The one cat I liked was a cute little kitten a housemate in college had. It's a good thing I liked that cat because I rode in a car from Maine to Indiana with him and his owner. We had car trouble somewhere in New York, and had to sleep overnight in the car outside a repair shop. By the time we got to Indiana I was a sneezing, wheezing, red-eyed horror. So even with the one cat I liked my experience was mixed.

Long before meeting me, my wife Amy swore she'd never marry anyone who didn't want cats. It's rather amazing that she let go of this vow and decided to marry me anyway. Her secret consolation—which she revealed only recently to me—is that she has always figured that if I died, the opportunity to get a cat would considerably soften the blow of my demise. I would guess that the mice that have recently taken up residence in our basement have made her reconsider her decision to let go of her vow not to marry someone who didn't want cats.

Last month—just a few days after I wrote the note about making sure next year's Pet Sunday sermon focuses on cats—my family took a trip to Michigan to see our relatives. The trip got off to a somewhat inauspicious start when our niece showed us to our room in her house. There, sprawled in the middle of the bed, was her cat. "This is where he usually hangs out," she explained. Then she hesitated for a moment. "You don't have allergies, do you?" she asked. I mumbled something about having them a little bit but that I've been taking Claritin for seasonal allergies anyways. So I slept in a cat's quarters, and, much to my surprise, didn't seem allergic at all. I know that my allergies have gradually changed over the years. Maybe, I thought, I don't have the cat allergy so badly anymore. You can bet that I kept this thought to myself!

¹ Marge Piercy, *My Mother's Body* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1985), pp. 72-73.

Later in the trip we stayed at Amy's parents' house out in the country. One evening I noticed a beautiful sunset through the windows and went outside to see it. My brother-in-law Dewey joined me a few minutes later and we chatted for awhile in the driveway. And then we heard a very loud meow. A very cute little kitten walked right up to us. He kept on meowing—and stayed right by us. Dewey said he was probably dropped off by somebody in the city that decided they didn't want a cat. The kitten looked to be in very good shape, so I don't think he had been on the loose for very long. I told Dewey that it would be trouble if Amy and my daughter came outside.

Amy and my daughter came outside. They went to the kitten like metal going to a magnet. Uh oh! Then our son joined the party. After awhile Dewey went in; Amy and our kids and I sat down on the grass with this cute little kitten. The kittie kept on meowing loudly and continued to seem somewhat agitated.

Then we heard a meow from the distance. It got closer and closer, and then a smaller kitten joined us. Once the smaller one arrived, the larger kitten relaxed and stopped meowing. The brothers had been reunited. We sat out there with them for a long time, each cat spending time on each of our laps. They hungrily ate some ham and cheese and drank some water.

And the pressure began to mount. We knew Grandpa and Grandma didn't want any cats in their house. Toward the end of high school Amy had surreptitiously kept cats in her room for several weeks before her mom discovered them. She wasn't going to try that again. So we left the kitties on the porch for the night when we in to bed. Maybe, I thought, they wouldn't be there in the morning. Amy assured me they would be. When we got in bed, Amy looked at me with a huge grin and said nothing. She didn't need to. Every cell in her body oozed out her desire to take these kittens home. I had no doubt but that our kids were feeling the same way.

The next morning the cats were still there on the porch. And the morning after that. The following morning we put them in a crate and made the trip home to Appleton. Between the two of them, they meowed softly all of four times during the nine hour journey. They've been to the vet and gotten a clean bill of health, and their male gender has been confirmed. The vet figures they're about twelve weeks old. After much haggling, the kids agreed on the names Boone and Chandler (from the TV shows *Lost* and *Friends*.) They and our dog Louie have established an understanding that thus far seems to allow for a peaceful co-existence. My allergies have not been too bad.

So a funny thing did happen on the way to Pet Sunday and yet another sermon focusing on dogs: my family was adopted by two adorable kittens. Barely a week after writing the note to recruit Cat People to do next year's Pet Sunday sermon, there are now two cats who are undeniably a part of my life. Even as I worked on this sermon at my home computer, Chandler kept jumping up on my lap, licking me, and then he'd jump on the keyboard.

It would be premature to call me a Cat Person, but something notable is happening. So with apologies to Dog People and/or Buddhists who came because Zen was in the title of today's advertised sermon, I couldn't do anything today but talk about these kittens. For me, a new chapter in my life with pets has begun.

Here is a picture of Boone (with the black nose) and Chandler (with the pink nose):



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