

THE
K A R M A
O F C A T S

spiritual wisdom from our feline friends

AN ANTHOLOGY EDITED BY
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ABOVE Frederic and Mary Ann

LEFT Puja

Radical Respect for Cats

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

We flunked the rescue-group foster-placement test. That's the test you face after you agree to socialize kittens or feral cats and prepare them for adoption. When the moment comes to take them to the adoption fair, you can't give up the kittens and you decide that the ferals really don't want to live anywhere else. This is what happened to us multiple times.

After our first two cats, Boone and Bebb, died, we thought we would wait a while before getting new cats. We'd given Bebb hospice care and had not traveled for more than a year. But our break from being cat companions lasted only two months. We found we really wanted fur in our lives.

Enter one-year-old Lalla, adopted from the rescue group that we would soon be working with to place other cats. She was full of energy and ran through our large loft in New York City, enthusiastically jumping up on every counter and piece of furniture. The rescue group advised that because she was a calico—calicos can be dominating and territorial—we should get another cat right away before Lalla had claimed the whole place as her exclusive domain. She tried to do that anyway. Over the years, she developed the habit of sitting at the door to our bedroom to make sure no other cats came in. Even if we had wanted more cats to make nighttime visits, she would not allow it. It was just the way she was.

We adopted Charley to keep Lalla company. He took over our home in his own way. Charley liked to move cloth things. He would go into the bathroom and get the towels, then drag them around the loft, howling about his "catch." If he couldn't get the towels, he would take the pillows off the

couch, the dish towels from the kitchen, any scarfs we didn't hang up, the stuffed animals in our bedroom, and more. We told our guests to close their suitcases or else Charley would unpack for them overnight.

Yelling at Charley as we took cloth things out of his mouth made no difference. Figuring that this odd behavior made him happy, we tried interrupting him, petting him, and lavishing him with gentle words. He still started each day by walking around the loft looking to see if there was anything he could move. We closed the bathroom and closet doors and put the dish towels and pillows away. We decided to just live with Charley the way he was.

Julian was only sixteen weeks old when Mary Ann trapped her in her hairdresser's backyard in Spanish Harlem. She was already scared of humans, and the vet predicted she would always be feral. But we were determined to turn her around. We put her in a large cat playpen and gradually, over several months, got her used to us being around. (Our office was in the loft.) One day Julian allowed us to pet her with a stick; a couple of weeks later we could use our hands. One day she came up to the door of her playpen and seemed to be asking for more affection from us. Eventually we let her out to join the other cats. Julian never became a lap cat, but she was no longer afraid of humans. She was not demanding of us or the other cats. Sometimes she hung out with several of them; often she found her own space for a nap in the sun.

Merton was perhaps the most adoptable of any of our foster cats. He was so handsome! He was rescued from the streets of Hoboken, New Jersey, at six months old, but for some reason he was not really feral. He was easy to socialize just by playing with him. We fully intended to get him a new home, but every time we got him ready to take to an adoption event, he would wrap his tail tight around his body, give us that "what?" look, so we just didn't go. Merton was a character. Long-haired with a big-jowled face, he weighed nearly twenty pounds and liked to sit on the back of our chairs while we were watching movies. Sometimes that meant he sat on a guest's head; nobody ever seemed to mind.

Tara, an all-black cat, and Boots, a tuxedo, came to us at the same time. Neither could be touched, and Boots would try to bite you. They lived in the cat playpens for months while we tried

to convince them that we could be trusted. Tara accepted her new situation quite readily, and we thought we could get her adopted easily. After all, she would sit in one of our laps and purr. But Tara had other ideas. Every time someone was due to meet her, she disappeared. We had lots of black bookcases, and she'd hide someplace in one where we just didn't see her. After the fifth time this happened, we decided hiding was Tara's way of telling us she wanted to live with us.

Boots was a harder case. She was with us for fourteen years, and we were never able to pick her up. Taking her to the vet required a long chase, many threatening hisses, and finally covering her with a towel so we could put her in a carrier. Yet Boots seemed in all other ways to be very happy. She liked other cats, and by the time she came to live with us, there were plenty of feline companions for her.

Boots's favorite was Clare, a Maine Coon cat with a very nurturing nature. All the cats got along with Clare, and much to Lalla's dismay, she was really the top cat in the household. Boots followed her around and snuggled into her lap to nap. After Clare died, Boots kept looking for her. That relationship taught us a lot about how animals can bond with each other. We respected Boots's solitariness and admired her deep relationship with Clare.

Nur also benefited from Clare's ministrations. She came to us having been rescued from the streets of Newark where she was either abused or had suffered a bad fall as a kitten. As a result, she had seizures all her life. We gave her herbs, which mitigated the seizures for years, and then drugs. But it was Clare who groomed her and comforted her. Nur had a funny run; she crossed her front paws in front of each other and kicked out her back ones like a rabbit. When she galloped down the whole length of the loft, she made quite a racket. But she also proved to us that even with a disability, a cat can have a wonderful life.

If you've been keeping track, you will have counted eight cats in the loft at the same time. There were two more, for a total of ten.

Our cats have reminded us that not only are they signs of Spirit in our lives, they are not under our control.

Pema and Puja came to us as eight-week-old kittens. They were very beautiful—dilute calicos with gray, white, and cream markings. Pema was short haired and Puja long haired, even though they were sisters. Their coats were not the only things that made them different. They had distinct temperaments from the start, and as they grew they became even more different.

Pema loved to be around us, to be petted and held. She spent the whole day on Mary Ann's desk, and because she also shed a lot, we had to clean fur out of the keyboard twice a week. She was not particularly interested in the other cats. She wanted a human!

At first we thought Puja was just shy—or resistant to us because we had to give her medicine for an upper respiratory infection when she was very young. But as the years went on, we discovered that Puja would best be called a hermit. She liked to be alone, away from both the other cats and us. She claimed the little house at the top of our cat tree as her territory, and she spent most of the day up there.

When we moved from New York City to California, only Puja, Julian, and Merton were still alive of our big cat family. We got a new cat tree with a house on top, but Puja never went up there. We placed an enclosure behind the couch on our screened-in porch, and she made that her new hermitage.

Sometimes we wish we could pull her out of her introversion—especially now that Julian and Merton have died and she's the only cat in the house. But if we set out on a campaign to change her, she would have no quality of life and neither would we. She is who she is.

In our book *Spiritual Literacy*, we listed some lessons we learned from our first cats, Boone and Bebb. Among them were: Live a rhythmic life. Savor the present moment. Keep out of harm's way. Cherish your wildness. When you want something, be persistent. If you are embarrassed, turn your back on the situation and get on with your life. Enjoy small treats. Keep yourself clean. Take a nap when you need one. Everyone needs a secret space.

Our family of rescue cats has reinforced those lessons and taught us one more very valuable one. They have shown us the importance of a core spiritual value we try to live by: reverence. It is the way of radical respect. It recognizes the presence of the sacred in everything—our bodies, people, all

elements of the natural world, and animals. Our cats have reminded us that not only are they signs of Spirit in our lives, they are not under our control. As American naturalist Henry Beston wisely wrote in *The Outermost House*, animals should not be measured by human standards: “In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.”

To live with radical respect for our cats means letting them be who they are, no matter how inconvenient or irritating their behavior may be. We have lived with Lalla and Pema’s gregariousness; Charley’s cloth addiction; Clare’s motherliness; Nur’s awkwardness; Julian’s, Merton’s, and Tara’s individuality; and Boots’s and Puja’s shyness. As we have adjusted to the cats’ natural ways, we have asked ourselves which of our behaviors and character qualities are essential to who we are and which can and should be changed. Such reflection is always a good spiritual practice.

Radical respect for our cats means we don’t impose our expectations upon them. We don’t try to make them into something they are not. If we let them into our home, then our home must change to accommodate them. If we let them into our hearts—if we really take the time to watch them and listen to them—we will see what it means to live an authentic life.

Our cats, just by being themselves, have encouraged us to express our own uniqueness. They have taught us what it means to honor our true selves.



ABOVE Damien and Baby

Baby's Purr

Damien Echols

When I walked off of death row, I thought that everything was going to be aces. That once I no longer spent my days locked in a cell, waiting to be murdered by the state, I'd live happily ever after. Unfortunately that didn't happen. I didn't take into account the effect that nearly twenty years in a cell, stuck perpetually in fight-or-flight mode, does to the psyche.

The day I walked off of death row, I was utterly destroyed. Within the first two years of my release I had two nervous breakdowns. I was emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually so depleted from the simple act of survival that I had no energy left to even interact with people. They meant the best as they would tell me stories about how they had heard of the case or how thankful they were that I was out—but I couldn't take any of it in, and for the most part the world was a blur of words and faces that I couldn't even retain.

Eventually the exhaustion and internal hell became so much that I could no longer even pretend to follow mundane conversations or remember anything—I would introduce myself to the same person repeatedly, even if they had already told me we'd met before. I felt like I was doing all I could just to carry out the rituals of society, saying things like “I'm great, how are you?” But there were no reserves inside me that actually allowed me to take in their answer—it was more like the repetition of a parrot.

I had no friends. I couldn't relate to the things out here that people talked about—things like television shows or concerts. I was like an alien who had been dropped off in a new world and just

expected to find his way with no clues. Needless to say, this didn't exactly make it easy to develop meaningful friendships.

I was alone a great deal, which to me was easier than the alternative—being around people who had nothing within their frame of reference that would allow me to make a real connection with them. It was just too difficult and draining to pretend I was interested in conversations about things like how much the price of parking had increased in New York City.

This is the state I was living in when I found Baby. She was starved nearly to the point of death—I could see every bone in her body. She was caked in filth and audibly wheezing from a serious respiratory infection. She was eating old rice out of a garbage can. Her eyes were as green as emeralds and looked out at the world with wary caution. This kitten had seen great hardship, and I immediately knew she was mine. As I pulled her from the garbage, she was too weak to even fight or try to run.

I carried her home, and for the next several days she camped in the bathroom. I'd go in and sit on the bathroom floor with her for hours at a time. She'd lie on my lap, purring loudly and wallowing on me as if she hadn't been touched in years. We spent entire days like that before she began venturing out of the bathroom.

Baby is highly intelligent and could tell when I was having hard times. There were days when I'd lie in bed for hours, sometimes with tears running down my face and at the end of my ability to cope. And there would be Baby, lying on top of me and purring—a constant loving presence. She would remind me that she needed me to keep going, if not for my own sake, then for hers. And I did.

Gradually, as the years passed, I began to slowly recover enough to once again pick up the practice of magick. Lao Tzu once famously said that the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. And so did my path to healing. Before I walked out of prison I was practicing magick for up to eight hours a day. After I was released, my psyche was so shattered that I couldn't even manage eight minutes. So . . . I did what I could and let go of the anxiety about what I couldn't. It began with a single minute of breath work—inhaling energy into my energy centers, lighting them up for at least one breath each, so that they could begin the process of repairing themselves.

And gradually, about six years after my release, I began invoking angels again. At first just a single one—perhaps an angel of the planetary energy Mercury, to aid me with eloquence and the ability to effectively convey ideas to whomever I was talking to when I went to an interview. It was very much like having to retrain a limb with physical rehabilitation, but not only could no one help me, they couldn't even see what I was doing or going through. However, when I was on death row, my firsthand experiences had showed me one thing again and again and again—that magick would never fail me. And that held to be just as true on the outside world as it had been on the inside world. Especially the angels. As I passed the mile marker of my seventh year out of prison, I worked my way back up to invoking hundreds of angels a day once again, which takes me anywhere from three to five hours.

One of the most important things I learned during the process was to approach life out here as Michelangelo approached his artwork. When someone asked him how he carved his sculptures, he said that he just chiseled away whatever part of the stone wasn't part of the figure. That's how I approached life in the outside world—by slowly chiseling away at whatever did not nourish me spiritually. Relationships, places, whatever—if it did not elevate my mind and soul, it was carved away until only the parts through which divinity spoke to me were left. And in the end, that's what healed me.

Throughout all this time, Baby was healing right along with me. She sits in my temple space as I do hour after hour of angelic invocations, absorbing nearly as much of the energy as I do. Her bed lies right next to my altar. Both of us have come further than I ever believed possible.

All things considered, the road to recovery has taken less time than I thought. The hard part of that journey was taking the first step.

Baby has helped nurse me back to health as surely as I did her. In her silence she did for me what people could not—just sat with me “holding space,” as some would say. Like a tiny monk with only four teeth left, she sat vigil against the darkness.

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