

## Cats, Birds and Souls

For several weeks now, our house has been the site of an invasion. Arn and I enjoy watching the bird. We have done this as long as we have lived there. We now have squirrel proof feeders, hummingbird feeders, thistle feeders, tube feeders and two fountains that keep fresh water running for the birds bathing pleasure. We've planted flowers that are attractive to birds and are well known at our local feed store where we purchase large bags of sunflower seeds. We've attracted the usual crowd; chickadees, cardinals, blue jays, finches of all sorts, orioles, woodpeckers, titmice, sparrows and grackles (lots of grackles) and doves. Doves, by the way, contrary to their reputations as birds of peace, take over the feeders and push out the little birds. We don't get really exotic birds but we enjoy watching our guests while they dine, even if we're not going to be calling the Audubon society with a rare find. However, for at least the past year, our enjoyment has been drastically curtailed. Our neighbor's cats have also seen our bistro as a gourmet paradise, or at least as a reliable diner.

The neighbors in question live one house away from us and have lived there longer than we have. We don't know them well, just enough to wave to and exchange greetings. We know that they are a middle-aged couple, are Mormon and are rumored to have at least seven cats. We don't see the entire cattery in our

garden, but two of the cats, a marmalade and a long haired black cat, are there almost every day. In the past, though they have always had cats, we have not had any difficulties with them. Either previous cats were sneakier or just weren't interested in freshly prepared chickadee. But these two cats are real hunters. If we could have, somehow, prevailed on them to concentrate on mice, which we often have in plenty, we might have reached some sort of détente. But these two like catching birds.

We have never had neighbor problems and really, really, did not want to start some kind of unpleasantness. We know how people can feel about any criticism of their pets. When we had beloved dogs, we, too, felt they could do no wrong. We also know our neighbors are responsible people who love their cats. We know that the cats are well cared for and well fed. Unfortunately, if you are a cat, or perhaps if you are a cat of a particular temperament, it doesn't matter if you are well fed. The urge to hunt is almost irresistible. It is a huge part of being a cat, a form of expression like a human's need for purpose. So how could birds, cats and humans all just get along?

We had used an intermediary in our first set of negotiations. Unwittingly, I might add. We had mentioned to one of the people in the house between us and the house where the cats reside some of our troubles. We hadn't asked these neighbors

who occupied a similar position to Switzerland between, say, France and Italy, to intervene as diplomats but somehow word got around and the cat owners evidently tried to moderate the cat's behavior. This was somewhat successful and, for awhile, there was peace. But this year the problem began anew.

We kept watch, running out into the garden and yelling like demented things whenever we saw a cat. This meant that a lot of our time was taken up at windows or staking out the patio. Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom from cats. Just like those obsessed with invasions of all kinds, our time was spent less and less enjoying our garden and more and more on guard.

Then two incidents occurred that ratcheted up the war. The first was that we watched helplessly as the black cat caught and devoured a chickadee before we could rush to its rescue. The second was that twice we found our fancy fountain/birdbath tipped over, possibly by cats jumping to get a bird. It was chipped and parts were broken. Arn was able to fix it but it will never look the same.

We still didn't want to confront our neighbors. We have lived in our house and enjoyed our neighborhood for many years. Also, we were baffled about a solution. Should we ask our neighbors to keep their cats in? Wouldn't they insist that cats, perhaps particularly these cats, have no meaningful existence if they have

to stay indoors? Did we have an answer for this that didn't involve what might be seen as incarceration, loss of catly liberty, an abrogation of catly rights? We were at a loss for the humane and yet effective solution. I went around humming 'Cats gotta pounce and birds gotta die.' Sad and torn.

Because, the fact is, we both like cats. I'm allergic to them, and to birds, too, by the way, but I've enjoyed warm, if physically distant, relationships with many cats over the years. I also realize that I'm addressing a congregation that, by reckoning, is well over half composed of cat lovers so admitting that I have been plotting against cats is probably more controversial than if I admitted to being a card carrying ISIS member. But the fact remains that all cats, feral cats particularly, account for a huge number of wild bird deaths. And the wild bird population is decreasing while the cat population seems to be doing very well. But we were still on the side of peace with neighbors.

So, instead of confrontation, we built a wall. Yes, us, a wall. In our defense, we didn't think our neighbors would pay for it. We also were somewhat limited in our ability to build something truly effective. Have you any idea what kind of expense would be involved in walling out cats? So we settled for a deterrent. We bought netting and loosely attached it to boards that ran between the back of our shed and our other neighbor's fence, the alley the cats used to keep out of sight

until they were ready to pounce. We hoped this would force them out into the driveway, away from hiding and that this would make our garden less attractive.

Then we found ourselves worrying about the cats getting caught up in the netting. So we had to stay close to home in order to keep checking that they weren't helplessly bound up. We needn't have worried. The first cat through pulled down the netting in quick order and escaped unscathed.

Then, all our good intentions of peace with our neighbors went up in smoke. We saw our neighbor as she was getting groceries out of her car and we told her about the chickadee incident and the fountain incident and she responded, rather flippantly, "I'll give you a squirt gun." We were seething! What an inadequate response! How uncaring! And, besides that, did the only solution have to involve arming ourselves?

For what seemed like a long time after this, we went out of our way to avoid them. I'm not sure if they were also avoiding us, but it was very awkward. We ducked quickly into the house, keeping our heads down. Though we didn't talk about it, the fact that we were deliberately doing this kept weighing on me. I wondered what, if anything, the resolution might be. Would it escalate? How could it be resolved? My initial feelings of anger gave way to feelings of sadness. It wasn't like losing a friend, but it was, still, painful, these unresolved issues.

Then, something did happen that gave me a chance to resolve the situation. Our street was paved and everyone had to park on the cross street. One day, as I was getting out of my car, I noticed that my neighbor was parking right behind me and got out of her car at just the same time. We both looked the other way to avoid eye contact and then I thought, 'this is silly.' I said something to her about having to walk further with groceries and hoping the paving would be done soon. She looked relieved and agreed and then said, "How much did your fountain cost? I think we should replace it."

I told her that we wouldn't want her to replace it. We'd just like it not to happen again. She said she was sorry the cats had done this. I said we had also been worried about the cats being crushed by the fountain as it fell. We agreed it was a problem, cats being cats and birds being birds. We came to no solution, but I left feeling better just because she had been concerned and I think she felt better too. We aren't any closer to each other but we wave at each other and greet each other again and that is good enough for me. Mostly, I'm glad that I'm not feeling angry any more.

Often, I find, there is no definitive solution. Only in the movies, perhaps, are there decisive victories, the triumph of the heroes over the villains. Much more often we are left with incomplete solutions to situations that are more complicated

than we imagined. Even when we seem to win, we find that the victory is not as sweet as we had imagined. We find we do not really want to reduce our opponent to ashes. We find that we are faced with the problem of what to do with the defeated. We find that mercy, that kindness, are far greater virtues than we thought they were in our moments of wrath.

In Dante's great poem, the Divine Comedy, he pictures the realm of purgatory, where souls expiate the sins they committed on earth. There are nine circles in purgatory, and one of them is for people who were wrathful in life. They wander forever blinded by black smoke, an analogy for the anger that blinded them in life. I found that, when I was less angry, I realized that cats are only a problem to birds because we, humans, have upset the natural balance of nature. As our homes invade the homes that were once woodlands, we, and our cats, encroach on the songbirds. Also, irresponsible humans do not spay or neuter their cats and, all too often, they abandon their cats when they are tired of them, leaving them to become feral. I also remembered that the destruction of the world's rainforests has done more to deplete the bird population than anything else. Cats have not been responsible for the destruction of birds' habitats. They are only being cats when they pounce on chickadees. This is their instinct and they are bound by instinctual behavior.

Even though much of recent psychological studies have shown that our free will is not as free as we thought, that we are, to a much greater extent than we might have thought, determined by forces within us that we don't always understand, we are not cats or birds.

We are unique in the animal kingdom, as far as we know, for our great ability to transcend instinct, to be able to choose much of how we live, and even more, how we think and react to things. Even the most advanced animals do not have our gift of thought and language.

We are nearly at an end to this shaggy cat story and the real question it asks is how can we all get along, cats, birds and souls? We have competing needs and desires. We live in a political climate that encourages us to be angry with those who compete for resources, for those who seem to threaten our needs and desires. Anger and sadness weave in a devil's dance and it takes a lot to get us off that dance floor. People use anger as a way to mask depression but anger creates its own sadness, the sadness of ruptured relationships. So how do we end this invitation to mutual madness?

We can choose to follow the first principle. When we think about what gives people worth and dignity, we see that it includes an ability to have mutually respectful relationships. And that means being able to understand other's points of



view, even when we don't agree with them. Correction: especially when we don't agree with them. It doesn't mean giving up our own viewpoints but it does mean that the people who have a different take on things are still people. This is very difficult. Much more difficult than any religious ritual I can think of. At least, I know how difficult it is for me. And yet, being able to have mutually respectful relationships is the only way to live with each other.

But we also have the seventh principle, to tell us that our actions and thoughts have consequences. We are part of the web of life and what we do and how we think has consequences not only for others but for ourselves. When we wall ourselves off, when we stoke our anger at others, we also are caught in the web of those emotions. The thick smoke of anger blinds us to other alternatives, blinds us to what we could gain for our relationships with others. We need to resist the siren call of hatred and anger that has destroyed so much of our society. We can see places where we can compromise, if compromise is not possible, ways to mutually coexist. If we could do this, we would have a true revolution.

Mutual coexistence doesn't have the ring of more noble words like truth or triumph or justice but after a week or so of feeling at odds with my neighbor, it will do for me. The thick smoke of my anger is gone and, without it, I find the summer sun shining and the world a much more sparkling place. Not in victory but

in quiet understanding, with people who also seem to desire the same, I find contentment.