

A Reflection on Yang: Animals as Spiritual Companions

by Carmen Emerson

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My husband, Jim, has a t-shirt that reads, "In Ancient Egypt, cats were worshipped as gods. Cats have never forgotten this."

This is certainly true in our household where, until last week, our three cats Remus Lupin, Yin, and Yang, reminded both of us, on a daily basis, of their status...and ours.

Nine years ago I rescued two abandoned kittens, christened Yin and Yang by my husband. These flame-point Siamese kittens, just 4 weeks old, were in pitiful shape. The morning after the rescue, when I took them to our vet for a good once over, their list of ailments was exceedingly long...and expensive. I'm sure the fact that our vet purchased a new Lexus not long after we adopted these kittens was pure coincidence!

Yin, the female, was born blind. She has no pupils – just eyes of a solid milky blue, like star sapphires. Within the first 7 weeks he lived with us Yang, the male, had 3 surgeries – he even died during one of them – but kitty CPR brought him back, and he eventually came home. In the meantime, his little blind sister had learned her way around our house, exploring every nook and cranny, jumping, climbing, playing and charming her way right into our hearts with her bravery. As Jim says, she has the heart of a lion. She's not above asking for help, though, and when she gets lost or disoriented, she has a special cry that brings her brother running to comfort and guide her.

So last week was an especially sad one in the Emerson household, when Yang became severely ill. All of his systems began shutting down, and on Saturday he was euthanized to end his suffering. Since then, Yin has been wandering through our house calling for her brother – I recognize that special, mournful, cry – and although I can comfort her in some ways, I cannot replace her lifelong companion.

Jules Verne wrote, "I believe cats to be spirits come to earth. A cat, I am sure, could walk on a cloud without coming through." Certainly life with our "spirits come to earth" has been rich with important lessons, lessons about Courage, Devotion, Determination, Curiosity, Ritual, the Importance of Fun and Play, the

Importance of Comforting and Being Comforted, the Importance of Asking for Help/Offering Help/Accepting Help when we need it, and the Importance of Letting Go when we must. In addition to these important life lessons, these 2 little creatures have helped me develop a wonderful spiritual practice.

You see, I'm the kind of person who has a very hard time turning my mind off, so meditation is a struggle for me. I've started several meditation classes, but I usually fall asleep and I find that the snorting/snoring thing I do tends to disrupt the rest of the class. But where meditation has failed, petting cats has triumphed!

There is a rhythm to petting cats, and no matter how full of details my mind might be when I begin petting Yin or Yang, after a few minutes some feline magic begins to happen. First of all, it's hard to pet a cat properly and do anything else at the same time: this is definitely not a multi-task function; it requires attention and focus. It is filled with purpose and intention. There is a very "in the moment" quality to it – a cat entitled to a good petting is not easily put off until later.

Their fur is soft and warm under my hands, completely different than the dry papers and angled books and computer keyboards I've been touching all day.

As I pet them I notice that my breathing slows, keeping time with the rhythm of their purring, their own little organic ode to joy that I help to orchestrate. Not only do I hear their purring, but I feel it, too – the vibrations reminding me that this small little creature trusts my touch – trusts this much bigger and stronger body to hold and stroke their vulnerable little bodies. Their faith in my gentleness strengthens my resolve to be worthy of their trust. They remind me that trust is the most sacred, and most fundamental of qualities necessary for healthy, loving relationship.

And, their trust makes me hopeful: if two creatures who do not even speak the same language can connect on this level – then there must be hope for those of us who actually do share language...

In the deepest part of me, I know that a daily devotional with this rosary of fur, paws, whiskers, purrs, love, and trust is necessary to both my physical and spiritual well being.

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As we continue to ramp up during this spring semester, are you grounded by your own spiritual practice? We are busy people with many commitments, trying our

best to live up to the demands of a seminarian's life, trying our best to prepare for the life of ministry, trying our best to be all that God calls us to be. I've shared a story about one spiritual practice; and I would love to hear stories about yours – sharing our stories about that which sustains us helps us to articulate our faith.

Whatever your spiritual practice, may it sustain and strengthen you for your sacred journey. And, if by chance your household includes a 4-legged, finned, or feathered family member, perhaps you have a spiritual practice companion just waiting for your call to worship.