

CATWRANGLING

Michael Bettencourt

347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com • m-bettencourt.com

We have four indoor cats who let us take care of them, and then we have the feral contingent who belly up to the bar for breakfast and dinner and occasionally shelter overnight in Chez Feline, our thrown-together lodging made out of a Rubbermaid tub and insulation.

Why do we do this? Why do we spend a considerable amount of money taking care of other mammals who, in the words of conservatives, are “takers” and not “makers”?

I think the easy answer, and possibly even the right one, is that taking on the responsibility of caring for other creatures makes me and the Marvelous María Beatriz feel more fully human, that is, we make a closer approach to modeling the character and temperament of what we consider a human being to be like. We also know that this model human being is a construct, a rhetorical device, a handy-dandy Platonic ideal, and it is wildly incomplete since we've excluded from the “true human being” all the predatory skills Homo sapiens has evolved over the past few million years.

Perhaps a better way to say it is that our catwrangling makes us feel less like a full-blown Homo sapiens by making us feel more like what Homo sapiens could be like without all the dark and driven parts.

Whatever the deeper motivations, we can't deny that we just enjoy the cats' antics and company, and two of the ferals, Bandida and Calaca, have a special connection that is as special as any held with a fellow H. sapiens.

Bandida has her name because her face markings look like the mask of Zorro. Petite of build, she sits in waiting while we bring out the food with her left paw raised, something like a feline analog of holding a teacup with the pinkie extended. Unneutered, the tom cats got to her all the time; as she finished one litter, she'd start gestating another.

About two years ago, she had a litter of five, which we managed to capture and bring inside to foster. With the help of Elfie, a local cat advocate for trap/neuter/release, we also hooked Bandida several months later and got her spayed. We found homes for

CATWRANGLING

three of the kittens and kept two, whom we've named Seamus and Fiona (at the time of naming, we were in a love-fest with Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet).

What we also found out as Bandida was in the hospital was that she had given birth to a litter of two, which we literally stumbled across in the backyard. The daughter of our landlady took one in, but the second one refused to be nabbed. We dubbed her Calaca because her face colorings resembled the painted skulls of the Days of the Dead.

So, we charmed Calaca as best we could with dollops of Gerber's chicken dinner on our extended fingertips and daily doses of good food and clean water. We knew that the longer she lived outside, the less chance there was that we could ever get her to be an inside cat, but we needed her to hang around long enough so that we could trap and neuter her when she got old enough.

Which we did, and for five days of recovery we kept her in the cage with food, water and litter until the stitches healed. And then on the sixth day, we put the trap on the back deck and lifted the gate, and off she shot. We thought that was that: we'd done our good deed, and she'd at least be protected from being preyed upon.

Except that Calaca had other plans. Not only did she return to the back deck, she slowly domesticated herself to our presence.

First, it was the brief allowance of a scratch behind one ear or the other. When that got comfortable, she offered us that special place where the tail meets the body and where a well-done rubbing raised the haunches and arched the back.

Then there was a trill of fingertips under the chin, and before long she allowed us to pick her up and hold her.

To this day, before she eats, she wants to head-butt our hands and have us scratch her between the ears, have a few long-rubs along her spine and do a knuckle-rub on the special place.

How did she do that? Where in her brain does a decision like that get made? We don't know, but we do know what a gift her choosing of us is. No matter what crap is raining down around the world, at least on our back deck, this creature has chosen us to

CATWRANGLING

choose her, and the connections are born that make the day-to-day trudge toward one's death feel less brutal and lonely.

Fiona did much the same thing. We were only able to bring her in a week after we got her four siblings, and that week of feral living and training by Bandida made a large difference. We had the kittens in our guest room, with the door blocked off by a jury-rig of cardboard, foamcore and tape.

Twice a day, I would bring in five bowls of food and spread them around the room so that they wouldn't poach off each other, and four of them would beeline for the chow while Fiona would circle the perimeter before she would edge into the bowl that was always farthest from me.

I would also sit there for while and let them clamber over me (one of the great delights of the day), and Fiona would also be on the outside watching. Bit by bit she would inch forward until she touched my leg and lay the length of her body against it. She didn't interact with the other cats; she just acclimated herself. Little by little, little by little each day.

I wondered how a cat thought about these things, decided about these things, because clearly, that's what her behavior showed: measuring distances, calculating risk, making choices. But of more immediate delight was watching her accommodate herself, first to my leg, then a climb up onto the thigh, then a leap from there up to the shoulder, then scurry away as if she had frightened herself by her boldness. Then repeat.

To this day, of our four indoor cats, Fiona is still accustoming herself to being handled, but she has gotten so much better at it. At night, she likes to find the spaces behind bent knees or in the curve where ankle meets foot to settle in for the night. And she will stay settled in even as María Beatriz and I heave ourselves into different positions during the night, riding the flexing covers like a surfer riding a wave.

The comfort that comes from this kind of taking care goes both ways. The cats know on some level that their indoor world (they have never been outside except in carriers to go to the vet) is safe, accoutered with everything they need, and we know, as we provide that world, that these four creatures—at least these four creatures—are not at the mercy of the world that *H. sapiens* has created outside. We have given them sanctuary,

CATWRANGLING

and, in turn, provided ourselves sanctuary from the dank and murderous parts of the species.

The Jews profess the duty of tikkun olam, of repairing the world, and what's always struck me about that duty is that it must come from an underlying assumption that the world has been created broken from its very beginning, its fracture a fundamental element of its being and not the result of some deviation from an ideal of wholeness—that, in fact, wholeness was never the purpose of the creation, just as it is certainly not the evolutionary history of *H. sapiens*.

I feel that what María Beatriz and I do with and for the cats is our act of tikkun olam, that what we're repairing with our rescue of the cats is the endemic cruelty and isolation that constitutes part of the skin and bones of the broken world.

Our repair, of course, is in the nature of a patch, but what else could it ever be since there is no way, ever, to repair the fundamental fracture at the root of everything. We patch and we patch and we patch and hope that everything holds for as long as it can against the pressure, especially the pressure of our species as it goes about fouling its nest and sowing its discord.

In the meantime, their napping in the sun brings calm and balance to our home, which repairs us, and they do it without giving it a second thought. The least we can do is have that second thought and, in thinking it, move a bit closer to being human.