



Cleopatra's Right Ear

19

First my mother. Then my cat.

I had no idea cats could get breast cancer until I felt a strange lump on Cleo's tummy and took her to see the veterinarian. It'd have to come off, he told me, and there was a good chance it was malignant.

Déjà vu to not quite a year before when an oncologist told Mom the same thing. The medical ritual for my cat was almost the same as it had been for my mother—first blood work, then exploratory surgery to see if there were more tumors, and if there were, more mammary tissue would have to come out. Then came

the big wound with lots of sutures that needed to be monitored for infection, the bruising and pain, and a week's wait for the pathology report to come back, telling us how advanced the cancer was.

My personal ritual for dealing with Cleo's frightening diagnosis echoed my response to Mom's diagnosis. I cried, I worried, I got a little angry, and I prayed a lot. Just as I had when Mom got the news in the fall of 2006, I put up a post on my blog asking people to pray for Cleo. And just as they had with my mother, a lot of people said they would.

A friend saw my blog post about Cleo's surgery and asked a theological question I had not anticipated: "Are you allowed to pray for a cat?" My immediate response was, "Of course." God cares about all of God's creation, including kitties, I told him. But his question got me wondering what my own faith tradition and others really say about animals and prayer.

As I began to do a little research, one man's name came up repeatedly: the Rev. Andrew Linzey, an Anglican priest and professor of theology at Oxford University in England. Linzey, director of Oxford's Centre for Animal Ethics and author of a number of important books on the subject of theology, ethics, and animals, is the world's preeminent "animal theologian." Who knew there was such a thing?

"Praying for animals may appear a lost cause within Christianity, but in fact there are blessings for animals as far back as the *Rituale Romanum* of 1614," Linzey told me, referring to a text of Roman Catholic rituals, including blessings. "There is a great deal in the Bible that supports the compassionate treatment of animals." In the ninth chapter of the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures, God establishes a covenant with *all* living

creatures — presumably domesticated cats included — and King David, in the biblical book of Psalms, writes, “The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. . . . The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.” Ergo, God’s grace extends to all living things, not just us humans.

In the New Testament, in his Sermon on the Mount found in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus himself talks about God’s care for animals. “Look at the birds of the air,” Jesus says. “They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” And Saint Paul, in chapter 8 of his letter to the Romans, alludes to animals being redeemed (along with humans) when he compares “the groans of creation to the pain of childbirth and creatures awaiting their redemption in Christ,” Linzey reminded me, adding, “Redemption is clearly a cosmic thing and since animals are going to go to heaven, there can be no good reason why we shouldn’t pray to God for them.” Some scholars call that kind of theological take on God’s relationship to all of creation “common grace” — as if something as superhuman and unfathomable as grace could possibly be considered common.

While there is no consensus among religions as to whether animals have souls and afterlives — most Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theologians say animals have souls but not the kind that live on after their bodies die, like humans do, while practitioners of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern traditions are more inclined to believe animals and humans belong to the same soul cycle of reincarnation — each has something to say about the care and kind treatment of animals. (One interesting bit of trivia I came

across in my humble research was that Islam's Prophet Muhammad is said to have been especially fond of cats.)

There are plenty of examples of prayer for animals throughout the history of Christianity. Perhaps the best known comes from Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, whose October 4 feast day is marked in some liturgical traditions with an annual "blessing of the animals," where worshipers are invited to bring their pets and/or livestock to church for prayers of protection. If the lore is to be believed, Francis loved animals so much he referred to them as "brothers and sisters" and once even gave up his hermit's cave so a donkey could have shelter. Francis often is depicted with birds sitting on his shoulders, and one hand extended to feed (or bless) them. The carved, wooden folk art *santo* statue of Saint Francis that I keep in my living room has a bird on each of his shoulders and what is either a large spotted cat or small Holstein lying at his feet. One common Franciscan prayer for animals says, "Blessed are you, Lord God, maker of all living creatures. You called forth fish in the sea, birds in the air, and animals on the land. You inspired Saint Francis to call all of them his brothers and sisters. We ask you to bless this pet. By the power of your love, enable it to live according to your plan. May we always praise you for all your beauty in creation. Blessed are you, Lord our God, in all your creatures! Amen."

While I don't know that I'd go as far as saying I think of Cleo as my sister, she most certainly is a member of the family. Maury and I adopted her from the Anti-Cruelty Society about a month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. We were so depleted—body, soul, and spirit—from the trauma of those horrific events that I think we both wanted something alive to care for, besides each other and

the anemic Christmas cactus in the bathroom. Before we walked into the animal rescue center in downtown Chicago on a Sunday morning, we had agreed we'd try to find an adult cat, rather than a kitten, to bring home. Kittens are cute and are generally easier to adopt out, while grown-up cats have a harder time. We wanted to give a home to a cat that might not find one otherwise.

It took us about ten minutes to find Cleo. We played with a few kittens—I defy anyone (apart from the woefully allergic) to resist the powerful draw of a smushy-faced little kitty—and attempted to engage a number of adult fraidycats before we came upon a skinny four-year-old tiger cat with a gimpy right ear, black kohl markings ringing her big green eyes, and an upside-down white heart-shaped marking around her nose and whiskers. Her name, the tag on the cage said, was Cleopatra—Cleo for short. When Maury bent down and stuck his fingers through the cage, she came right up to him and licked his hand. We took her out of the cage, and although she was shaking and clearly terrified by the cacophony being made by a room full of people and other cats, instead of trying to flee, she clung to him.

An hour or so later, when we climbed into our car with Cleo in a new plastic carrying case, Maury gave me a speech about how we weren't going to become crazy cat people who referred to themselves as "Mommy and Daddy." Approximately five minutes later, when Cleo sneezed several times in a row—the Anti-Cruelty Society vet had told us we could take her home right away (rather than waiting the usual forty-eight hours) because there was some sort of feline respiratory infection going around the shelter—I believe the first thing out of both of our mouths was, "It's OK. Mommy and Daddy are here." A few days later, when Cleo's eyes

had grown rheumy and she had stopped eating and drinking and was sneezing with increasing regularity, we ended up in the local animal hospital emergency room at midnight. “She’s severely dehydrated,” the vet said. “She has a head cold and when cats can’t smell because they’re stuffed up, they stop eating.” He gave her an IV of fluids and sent her home with us, with instructions to watch her carefully, heat up wet cat food in the microwave so she could smell it better, and, if all else failed, shoot water into her mouth with a syringe. She might as well have been a newborn baby.

For a week, we fussed and hovered over Cleo, even moving a futon cushion onto the living room floor so we could sleep with her between us. The names Mommy and Daddy stuck, and our kitty, without us realizing it at the time, had helped us focus on something other than the horror of 9/11 and begin to heal.

When Cleo came home after her cancer surgery with a foot-long sutured incision where doctors had removed all of the mammary glands on the left side of her body, she was frail and traumatized. I lifted her onto our bed, and she let out a soul-shivering howl of pain. I lay down on the bed beside her, and she crawled up onto my chest and pressed her hot little face against mine, moaned, and fell asleep. It was as if she wanted to get as close to me as possible, like a frightened child. I stayed in bed with her for the better part of a week while she slowly came back to life. Cleo has such a sweet, gentle, and amazingly sentient spirit. In the seven years since she came home with us from the shelter, she has become a true companion, one of the greatest blessings in my life.

I remember the painful night my mother called from Connecticut to tell us that my Aunt Mary — my godmother and one of the most important, most influential people in my life — was

dying and that we should get on the next plane home, I fell apart, wailing in a heap on the living room floor. Cleo came running down the hallway, meowing mournfully, and jumped into my lap, put her paws on my chest, and licked my face. She was trying to comfort me. It was remarkable.

Cleo and her younger sister, Mousie, whom we welcomed as a kitten in 2005, are a constant source of joy and delight for us. They're more like dogs than cats, sociable and affectionate. Mousie even plays fetch with balled-up pieces of newspaper. They are constant companions—by my side or at my feet as I work, and occasionally on my head as I sleep. I adore them and can't imagine life without them.

Nine months after her kitty mastectomy, I am thrilled to report that my cat, like my mother, is doing very well. Both, doctors believe, are now cancer free. And after successful radical surgeries, neither has had to endure radiation or chemotherapy.

The day Cleo had her kitty-mastectomy stitches removed, she was already pretty well back to her usual frisky self, so much so that in roughhousing with Mousie, she knocked over the statue of Saint Francis and broke his thumb.

Somehow, I don't think he'd mind.

Nothing a dollop of superglue and the power of prayer couldn't fix.



*I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with
forethought of grief. . . . For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
and am free.*

—Wendell Berry