

Sept. 25, 2016

Joy is free

I was sitting on my back porch enjoying the cool September air when “Speck” (one of a handful of cats living in our backyard) started nudging me for a scratch. Being a well-trained human, I began scratching the top of his head, and he purred at me appreciatively. He walked around my back, sniffed at something on the cement, and tugged at a fringe hanging off my torn jeans.

“What are you doing?” I asked, teasingly. “You tryin’ to eat my jeans? Is that what you’re tryin’ to do?”

Speck looked up at me quizzically. “Of course not,” he replied. “I was just amusing myself for a moment.”

It all started a few years ago when a feral cat came visiting our back porch. I put out some food. I thought she would dine, thank me politely, and go away, never to return. A few days later our back porch was the neighborhood Kit-Kat Club.

Despite feeding the cats and giving them fresh water each day, all we received in return was the joy of watching them play. Oh, occasionally we’d step outside to join in the fun, but as soon as they heard the door, they’d take off so fast that all we’d see was a bunch of little dust trails zooming into the horizon. It’s like we were Godzilla coming to wreak havoc on their backyard Tokyo. I wanted to play with them, like I would with a dog! I’d chase them through the yard shouting, “C’mere you stupid cat! I’m not going to hurt you!” but that didn’t seem to work at all.

Even when we couldn’t see the cats, we knew they were around. Boy, did we know. That first summer, they turned our squash garden into their own personal latrine. I’d never had a cat, so I just assumed that cats felt pretty much the same way about squash as I do.

It wasn’t until only a month ago that one young cat decided that I wasn’t so bad. He began to trust me. And the moment he left his feral life behind, he began opening up to me. While I appreciate our conversations, they aren’t quite the same as I had with our Lab, Sarah, for all those years; she died in 2011, and we still miss her. Dogs are so down to earth. Cats are, well, a little on the arrogant side.

“How was your birthday?” Speck asked on that cool, September day. (My birthday was a few weeks ago.)

“So, me and Charlene, we’re in an antique store where we know the owner, right?” I tell Speck. “Charlene tells him it’s my birthday and he asks how old I am. So, I tell him. So, he says ‘Oh, I have a brother that age.’ So, get this! His brother is 10 years older than me! He misheard my age and didn’t think anything of me being 10 years older than I am!” (Yes, this is true.)

Speck rolled his eyes. “You expect me to feel sorry for you? I’m only seven months old, and my financial advisor is already pressuring me to analyze my retirement plans. The average human life span is at least four times that of the average cat! Plus, because I live outside, my lifespan is even shorter, maybe 12 years, 15 tops.”

“You have a financial advisor?”

“You just completely missed the point of that whole thing, didn’t you?” my cat said.

“So, about half-way through my birthday (at this point, Speck shakes his head, frustrated), I threw out my back. (Yes, that’s true, too.) So, that night, I’ve suddenly aged 10 years, and I’m laying in bed unable to move a muscle or risk searing pain!”

“Yeah, and I eat crickets when the other cats hog all the cat food,” Speck responds. “Yet, I’m not asking anyone to feel sorry for me! You want to know what crickets taste like? CRICKETS! They’re disgusting! Blech! And it’s not like cat food is all that tasty. Have you ever checked the salt content in that stuff?”

“Well, what about birds? Do you really have to attack the poor birds?”

“You’ve never had chicken?”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about,” I said. “You can just lounge around all day in the grass ... chasing things and playing with twigs. No responsibilities.”

Speck stood up. He placed his paw on my leg. Considering our age difference, it was humbling to have him acting so ... fatherly. Plus, he was a cat.

“My point is not to elicit sympathy,” Speck said. “My life is good, despite the occasional dietary challenges. My hope is to convey to you that one can feel completely free—free of want, of illness, of ... responsibility--and still be lost. Alternatively, you can feel like you’re balancing all the burdens of your life and those of others on your shoulders ... and yet still feel free to feel joy, to even feel free!”

“How’s that?”

“C’mon. I’m a cat and even I know this!”

I thought for a moment. And another moment. And several more moments. After multiple moments, the answer dawned on me. No it didn’t. I still didn’t get it.

“Your God is our God too, Dave. He wants us to seek out joy! Who cares if the guy thought you were 102 years old! We cats have a saying: You can either curse the hairball, or give thanks that you hacked it up. Joy is a gift, free for the taking! Take a lesson from us cats: Sure, you may break an occasional planter, or poop somewhere you shouldn’t, but ultimately life is a celebration! Under what you think is a somber expression and a who-cares demeanor, we’re doing an emotional Macarena! We’re celebrating life. And don’t you think that this is just the way our God wants it?”