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CATS AND BIRDS – A BACKYARD EXPERIENCE

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One of the most important teachers I have had over the past two decades must undoubtedly be my cat Muschi, a stray that adopted my husband, Paul, and me about ten years ago and whose arrival led to many miracles in our household. Muschi adopted us by showing up at the deck door every evening and every morning for several days in a row, pressing his extremely pretty but lost-looking face into the glass. I had never had any pets in my life and was unsure what I wanted to do about this rather determined cat. Being the amazing cat he is, it only took him a few days until I began feeding him and soon thereafter he walked through the door, sat on the kitchen floor right in front of the food cupboard and meowed. He knew he had found his home. We, on the other hand, did not know what wondrous experiences we would encounter because of him.

One of the most remarkable teachings I received from him is learning to communicate with animals in a way that feels completely natural. Sometimes he communicates in just a regular cat fashion, meowing his way through to my attention, sometimes I hear actual words, and other times I receive his communication in symbols. Once I learned to listen and to talk

with him, I recognized that I could do the same with all animals. At times, though, just like other animals, he can be very silent on certain topics – not unlike most humans I know.

Now to the backyard experience. Our house is located close to a major park, and even though a property in the inner city, the back yard is rather substantial, with other deep yards backing on to it. As soon as we had moved there, I realized how wonderful an opportunity it was to attract an amazing variety of birds through birdfeeders throughout the entire year. Given the sometimes dreary and lengthy Ontario winters, simply the anticipation of having some beautiful singing and excitement through the birds' steady comings and goings warmed my heart. For many years, I thoroughly enjoyed the birds – as well as the squirrels attempting every means possible to get to the bird food, even though they had their own. I would observe them while sitting on the deck, having breakfast at the kitchen table, or looking out the window or deck door.

Eight years later, when Muschi arrived, I was unsure what was going to happen to the birds. I understood he wanted to have the choice of spending part of his time outside, leaving me wondering

how the birds would react – and in fact, whether they might not be in danger due to his predatory instincts. I realized at the time that I could just ask Muschi a question and receive his answer in some form, so I simply decided to ask him how he felt about the birds at the feeder. His answer was straight-forward: “It is fun to hunt them.” This response encouraged me to ask him what arrangements we could make for him to respect the birds at the feeder and not hunt them. With very little hesitation, he countered that all he really needed was the assurance there would always be a safe place for him on the deck and in the house as well as good food for him and then he would stay away from the birds. That seemed simple enough.

When I told Paul we needed an extra chair on the deck, reserved as Muschi’s safe place from which he could observe his territory, I was met with a reaction which was more than incredulous. Paul thought I had completely lost my mind. I knew differently, though, and convinced him to humor me. Almost disbelieving his own actions, my husband supported me and bought a cushioned chair that adorns the deck from early spring to late fall and has clearly become Muschi’s outdoors safe haven. Never once has he ever hunted a bird or even attempted to tease one. Gradually over the summer months, an ever increasing number of cats appeared in our back yard.



First only two or three, then up to ten different cats were strolling around and making themselves quite comfortable in the surroundings. Without exception, all of them respected Muschi on his chair, which none of them ever attempted to occupy. I was deeply saddened, though, when one of the cats proudly presented me with a dead young cardinal on my doorstep. I understood that this was a kind gesture on her part and an acknowledgement of respect for me, and yet, I did not want it and I certainly did not want to encourage that behavior. For a moment I felt lost.

Then I turned to Muschi and asked him about his suggestions. He told me to simply talk to the cats and the birds outside the same way I was chatting with him. Since I had nothing to lose, I did precisely that. I had already learned in my conversations with Muschi, and also subsequently read in some books on animal communication, to simply come from the heart, keep the language very straight forward and positive, and communicate as clearly as possible. I asked each cat over the course of the following week to kindly respect the yard rules in exchange for a safe place and dry food if they so wished. I told them I expected the cats to leave the birds alone so they could feel safe in my back yard – no hunting allowed.

Seven of the regular cat visitors were exceedingly compliant. It appeared they appreciated my openness and willingness to negotiate, and they never once made an attempt to hunt the many birds feeding in my back yard.

Three others presented somewhat more of a challenge. They were not particularly willing to engage in a conversation with me and I caught them several times trying to sneak up on the birds. However, I did not give up. I always saw them in love and light, and kept asking them what they needed in order to stop hunting the birds. Two of them simply wanted my attention as soon as they came to the yard, which was easy for me to do. I asked them for their names and then talked with them if they so wished – a desire that appeared to decrease rapidly once they knew they were acknowledged. The third one still was not willing to co-operate. I finally told that cat that she was not welcome in the yard unless she changed her mind. Only once after that encounter did I ever see her. I suppose I truly surprised myself in that instance because I was not sure she had ever heard or understood anything else before. I surmise that she had heard me but had just ignored it!

Since that day, any time a new cat appears I engage the newcomers in a similar conversation and inform them of the simple backyard rules. None of the cats disturb the birds.

To my surprise, though, I also had to talk to the birds which began to take advantage of the very respectful cats by teasing them quite openly. That led to expanding the rules to include the birds. I promised the birds I would keep them safe by asking the cats to refrain from hunting them in my backyard as long as the birds refrained from teasing the cats. That appeared to be a fair deal to the birds. Again, I was pleasantly surprised to learn how easily and smoothly all of these agreements worked. For more than ten years now, I have had the pleasure of cats and birds coexisting very peacefully all year long in my backyard. Now and then, I have to reiterate the rules due to the naturally occurring changes in the cat and bird population, although I strongly suspect, watching the happenings in my yard, the expectations are posted in the ether for all inhabitants to understand.

Paul, who had thought the birds, did not stand a chance when he first observed the massive invasion of cats, continued to live in utter amazement of the developments. Being the stubborn skeptic that he was, his comments always remained the same: "It's just a fluke. You don't really understand what they are saying and they don't understand you. You are just lucky."

And yet, here is a story to show that even the most skeptical and stubborn person might be convinced otherwise.

Muschi easily panicked when we left the house to go to work or run errands. His breathing always doubled in speed and his entire body was on alert. He panicked even more if we left him outdoors. I finally asked him what we needed to do to make him feel better. The answer turned out to be so incredibly simple: "Just tell me what you are doing so I know what is going on." From that moment on, I always informed Muschi when I was leaving for work, going shopping or even doing laundry in the basement – and not a trace of the panic remained.

Paul could not quite convince himself to "talk" to a cat as if he were a human and refused to engage in a conversation with Muschi. One day, he complained bitterly that he always had to wait for Muschi, who took his time coming back inside – especially when Paul was in a hurry to get leave. My advice was, "Just tell Muschi he only has five minutes to go for a run around the yard." He understood the concept of a short time span. Well, once again, I received looks of pity from my husband, who walked away muttering something not so endearing under his breath. Now imagine the scene I walked in on the next day: My husband was standing by the open deck door. Muschi was on his way out and I heard Paul say: "Muschi, you only have five minutes." When Paul turned around, he almost blushed as he noticed me standing at the entrance, tears in my eyes and speechless. His final sentence on the subject was: "I don't know why, but it seems to work."

Paul never once argued with me about anything I reported the cat saying and always informed Muschi about his whereabouts. He also began to pay much more attention to the behavior of all the animals in our back yard and alerted me more than once to a particular animal that he thought needed special attention. Even though he could not open himself up enough to understand the animals, he had certainly opened his heart wide enough to allow for the possibility of communication between animals and humans in ways inconceivable to him before.

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