



OF RELATIONSHIPS AND HERDING CATS

WORDS
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Many parents get pets for their kids to teach them about the care that goes into building a relationship. That's probably why, when I was two, my mother got me a black puppy that I named "Bow Wow." All her life, my mom laughed about the neighbors' reactions when she would lean out the back door and call, "Bow Wow! Bow Wow!"

After Bow Wow was killed by a car, my father said, "no more pets". I first subverted that edict by keeping horned toads inside my sock drawer (mostly). Somehow, my little Godzilla escaped several times. The last time, I was searching for it when I heard a scream from the living room where my mom was being interviewed. A white-gloved lady who had come to take the census accidentally found my horned toad—it was hanging by its tiny toenails, clinging to a coarsely-spun fabric lampshade, just inches from her face. That incident outed Godzilla, and I had to let him (or her?) go in the garden.

After that, I befriended a neighbor's orange-striped tomcat who would come to visit when my brother and I built blanket tents in our yard. I called him "Puss." (I had a way with names!)

Truthfully, I wasn't too successful in bonding with the horned toads. But since Puss, who got smuggled into my room many times, I have had a dynasty of ginger tomcats. The ninth and current one—the one sitting on my keyboard—is called Apricat.

Woden was the sixth. I trained him to fetch paper balls, to play ping-pong with balled-up socks, and at night, if I snapped my fingers, he would run down the hall and curl up on the foot of my bed.

Woden was deeply intuitive. No matter what time I came home, he'd be waiting, his little striped face peering out the window. I wondered if he could recognize my footsteps? If I was upset, he'd

sit on my lap, purr and bump noses in that feline love gesture called bunting. Woden saw me through interstate moves, divorces, injuries and heartbreak, proving far more constant than some of the human tomcats who shared my living quarters. Woden and I were deeply, wordlessly bonded.

About three years into Woden's life, I left him with friends while I traveled in Europe. When I returned six months later, I wasn't sure if he'd remember me.

For the first two days, Woden sat near me, just out of reach, frostily turning his back to me. On day three, he turned and glared at me—almost all day.

But that evening, as I was getting ready for bed, on a whim, I gave Woden the snapping-fingers command. He sprinted down the hall, jumped up on the foot of my friends' guest bed and began to purr! I was dumbfounded. It was the same command and the same cat—but a different bed, a different house and a different year on the calendar!

Mom was right. I have learned a lot about relationships—both human and animal—from living with cats. For example:

- Live in the moment
- Don't hold grudges
- Learn to give and take. Compared to dogs, cats aren't all that eager to please; no cat would pull a sled through the snow just to win points with a human! To befriend a cat, you have to sometimes accept his timing and interests. That's not a bad idea with people either.
- Cuddling helps—sometimes a wordless touch is just what's needed.
- You can't command love. You just have to be there, offer your heart and let it come. Anything else is just herding cats.