



Last Wednesday, our mischievous cat Arthur – not to be confused with our mannerly cat Frodo – came prancing through the cat flap with a baby squirrel in his mouth. I heard it before I saw it; the wee critter was squeaking up a storm. Panicky – my mother’s voice in my head warning, “*yo u don’t know what diseases it has!*”

– I picked up the cat, critter in mouth, and put them both outside. My daughter was screaming – “Mom! Get the squirrel out of his mouth!” – but Arthur had already trotted off, and there was nothing I could do.

Fifteen minutes later, Arthur traipsed in again, this time laying his spoils – the same baby squirrel – daintily at my feet. (A gift for you, m’lady.) The tiny creature was lying there on my kitchen floor, visibly unscathed but traumatized, still breathing and blinking its eyes. I gently scooped it up in a dustpan and took it way out back, placing it beneath an azalea bush – where I thought that brute Arthur wouldn’t see it – hoping the poor thing would either rally or die in peace. (Amelia wanted to take it in and nurse it back to health, but I kept thinking about those diseases... )

Five minutes later I looked out the window, and there was that damned cat, dragging the hapless squirrel around like a rag doll, having a grand old time. By that point, Amelia was distraught – “Mama, make him stop!” – and I was fairly unhinged, myself. I grabbed the dustpan again, but this time, I hid the squirrel – mauled and shell-shocked, but miraculously still breathing – under a more obscure patch of shrubbery, then covered it with leaves – all but its little face – and prayed for a quick and merciful demise.

Half an hour later, as I was leaving for the Ash Wednesday service at my church, I saw that our clever cat had found the squirrel yet again, and was gleefully toying with it, tossing it in the air like a miniscule pizza. I gave up, feeling wretched and helpless, and went off to receive my ashes... which seemed appropriate. (What? No sackcloth? I could really use some sackcloth...)

I told my husband the whole story later, still furious with Arthur and practically in tears, and he reminded me of a simple truth. "You can't be angry with Arthur," he told me. "He's just being a cat. It's his nature."

As with cats, so with politicians... and pundits... and, okay, people.

Human nature is a mixed blessing, isn't it? It's supposed to be superior to just plain *nature* nature – mainly because it includes free will, I suppose. Among all the animals, only human beings can choose their behavior... can choose not to treat their fellow creatures like unfeeling, insignificant chew toys. Only we humans can "rise above" our animal instincts. Bully for us!

The problem is that we're not so good at rising above our *human* instincts – things like prejudice, tribalism, and petty judgment. We've been told again and again – by every religion and wisdom tradition known to man – that

*love*

is what separates us from the animals. No, not affection or attraction or fondness – but love.

Heavy-duty, nitty-gritty, counterintuitive

*agape*

love. We have the capacity to forgive when we feel like condemning, to offer grace when we long to render judgment. On some level, we all know this is the magic formula, too – the one that breaks the curse and reverses the spell, turning the hideous beast back into a handsome prince. We've seen it work. We know it's not a fairy tale.

And yet... how rarely we avail ourselves of this power that is ours and ours alone. It's there for the taking... it's just not our nature to do so.

But there *are* people out there defying human nature... and thereby changing it. (All it takes is practice.) These people give me hope.

I just finished a book called 'The Unlikely Disciple' that some friends passed along, knowing I'd like it. A "memoir," I guess you'd call it, the book was written by Kevin Roose, a fairly typical Brown University student – socially and politically liberal, not particularly religious (a lapsed Quaker) – who transferred for one semester to Jerry Falwell's notorious (in his circles) Liberty University.

Roose went undercover, in a sense – not using a fake name, but keeping his background and circumstances vague and his plans for the book under wraps. He was determined to get an authentic Liberty experience – and that he did – and he returned to Brown a changed man. No, Roose’s politics didn’t change. Nor did his social views. But he gained a heightened sense of spirituality – and even an appreciation for the religious life – and perhaps most important, he came to love the people he met at Liberty. Incidentally, nobody was more surprised than Kevin Roose.

Near the end of the book, Roose’s father asks him what he’d thought of Jerry Falwell, who has just died of a heart attack. Roose, having interviewed Falwell a few days earlier for the school newspaper – and full of mixed emotions – cannot supply the answer he knows his father longs to hear.

*“He was a complicated guy,” I say.*

*“That’s it?” my dad says. “A complicated guy?”*

*“Yep. That’s it.”*

*He’ll never understand.*

That simple sentence stuck in my throat and I just let the tears come.

*He'll never understand.*

People like Kevin Roose help keep me sane. Just when our national discourse – and plenty of personal discourses – have me teetering on the edge of despair, circling what Bunyan called the ‘slough of despond’ like a bug circling a drain, a random book by a big-hearted college kid comes along to pull me back, comfort me, remind me that I’m not alone. As election madness grows more furious each day and the culture wars resurface with a vengeance, there are still some who refuse to join the fray... who resist reducing people to their politics. The world needs political/culture warriors – I think? – but it also needs conscientious objectors, and these are my people.

That sounds uppity and arrogant, doesn't it? Like I think I'm something special. I don't. The truth is, some of us just find it easy to empathize – even sympathize – with people from both sides of the socio-political divide. When it's easy, it's nothing to brag about. Politically speaking, I guess you could even say people like me lack principles. Oh, we follow the issues... and we sometimes even have positions. They just don't seem that... important? Not in the grand scheme, anyway. We recognize the major impasses in our culture – and they are major – but we just don't find them... impassable. It's not that we don't see the wide gulf between the two large, immovable bodies of granite... or that long drop to the ground below. It's just that we see them and think, “I can do this!” And by “this,” we don't mean “swing back and forth across the ravine like Tarzan on a vine.” No, we actually think we can build a bridge... and bring others across it... from both directions!

We are usually wrong.

When you're obsessive-compulsive about building bridges that nobody wants to cross, you spend a lot of time standing in the middle of those shaky, slipshod bridges... frustrated and alone. It's about as much fun as it sounds. But you can't help yourself; that's your natural home. It's where you belong. And every now and then – once in a very blue moon – somebody for whom it's *not* so easy creeps out on that rickety bridge to join you... and then somebody else, maybe from the other side of the gulf. And, face to face now – without all that space between them – they really see each other. They may still disagree, but they *see*. They *understand*.

I know it sounds hokey, but I kind of live for those moments. They mean that somebody has had the courage and humility to re-examine a long-held belief... or to look through another's eyes... or to extend the benefit of the doubt... or maybe even – and here's the one that truly slays me – maybe even rise above human nature.

And when that happens – when enemies step out in faith, on a flimsy bridge, to become friends – I think it's the cat's meow.

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