

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Blessing of the Animals: Who Blesses Whom?

“My father didn’t love easily, and so he was not easy to love.” Zen teacher and author Karen Maezen Miller is speaking. “For as long as I could remember, my mother ran interference for him. ‘Your daddy really loves you,’ she’d say. We all had reasons to doubt. As soon as I could steady myself on two feet, I kept my distance....

“Life was plainly hell for him.... His was an unrelenting darkness without the grace of even one flicker of faith. After Mom died, my sisters and I would imagine his decline, certain that the burden would befall us to be kind to an unkind man and generous to a scrooge. We weren’t at all sure we could do it.

“In his loneliness, he had taken a dog, a rescue.... She was skittish and untrained ... although we hesitated to think Dad much of a hero....

“And then things turned out differently. My [father] began to do things differently.

“He imagined a new life in a new place, far away.... With the intention and resolve he had lacked in nearly every other year of his life, [he set about] to accomplish something. He gave away or sold all the stuff we were so sure we would be saddled with. He sold his home, the albatross we’d already hung around our necks. He loaded up his dog and his truck and moved to a mountain town where, six months later, he could no longer breathe.”

Fast forward. Karen Maezen Miller and her sisters are standing around his bed in the ICU. “I cried and I smiled,” she says, “realizing that only I could supply what had been so sparing between us.

“‘I love you,’ I told him just before we turned everything off.

“And then, to my sisters, ‘I’ll take the dog.’ ...

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“I did not want a dog.

“I am not a dog person,” Karen Maezen Miller continues. “I am not a cat person. I am only intermittently a person person. In that regard, I have never been anyone but my father’s daughter....”

[Arriving at our home, my father’s dog] “catapulted from the car, darted through the front door, and [let loose] on the Oriental. *No one should have to put up with this.*

“And then, the hair. Clouds of fur drifted along the baseboards, coated the sofa, and clung to our clothes.... *This can’t go on....*

“And then, worse of all, the walks. [She] chafed at the bridle; I yanked at the leash. She bolted in front, ... sprinting and vaulting, exposing my complete inadequacy as a handler. She loved it. I hated it. *I hate her.*

“And then.

“Little by little I shed my resistance. Like a lark, I’ve made a nest from never-ending dog hair.... When my dog places her quivering muzzle on my lap, telling me it’s time to go for a walk, I release my selfish grip on the day. So many walks around the block, and each time I come home to a very different place, all because of what dogs do. They save your life by making you leave it behind. Good dog....

“‘She was my father’s dog,’ I am quick to explain to others on first meeting, and then I stretch the unspoken for a moment after, because what I really mean is, ‘She is my father’....

“... I do not fashion my father as better or worse, ...but leave him unencumbered, with his dog and his daughter, at peace, unleashed forever in a field of love....

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I have a second, final story for you today, also about a woman and loss and a dog and life. I beg forgiveness of my cat people for all this dog-ness;

you know better than most that it's always also metaphorical and the species are interchangeable.

Patou, an Australian shepherd, came into poet Laurie Clements Lambeth's life when Laurie had already been living with MS – multiple sclerosis – for many years. It weakened her left side and impaired her mobility. She walked with a cane – what she calls her “third leg.”

Aussies are herding dogs; they love to have a job to do. Laurie taught Patou to help her up the stairs. She writes, “With one hand, I would hold the rail and with the other I grasped her collar, and she [hoisted] me up, surging.” Patou also learned to pull her up when she fell and to stand beside her as she rose from sitting, steadying her. *Good dog!*

And then, out of the blue, at an agility class, Patou “ran up a tall wooden apex structure called an A-frame, and couldn't make it to the top. She stopped a little higher than Laurie's shoulders, unable to gather enough momentum to climb all the way up the steep incline, and she turned to her. “This was the moment my dog let me know that she needed me,” Laurie says. “... Watching her scramble to gain footing, ... I stretched out my arms, ... and she dropped into them, uncharacteristically laying each front paw on either side of my neck.”

It was bone cancer.

To buy time, Patou's right leg was amputated. And then both Patou and Laurie walked on three legs. Patou was unfazed. “She still jumped to catch toys in midair [and] ran faster than other dogs, ‘as though,’ [Laurie's] father would say, ‘the other leg just got in the way.’”

“All bodies change over time;” she writes “no one body is ever permanent or completely symmetrical.... There is beauty in this change, the grace and balance found in asymmetry, ... in two creatures from different species of vastly different sizes using three legs to move through life....”

“Patou and I both became acquainted with [loss] far earlier than many of our respective species typically do. I shuffled like my grandmother in my early 20s.... In the prime of Patou's life, she ... lost her job of pulling me up the stairs....”

“Through loss, we both [learned] what else our bodies could do to persist in this world, how to adapt to the flux and flow of life.... When Patou and I ... approached the sliding glass doors of a pet supply store, each on three legs, I caught sight of our reflection and saw ... persistence, trust, grace.”

Eventually, as her cancer progressed, Patou needed “a harness with long, looped handles to support [her] front end as she descended stairs. “This dog,” says Laurie Clements Lambeth, “who carried me up so many flights, welcomed my hand raising her by those handles, lifting her chest to lighten her descent as I braced against the stair rail. A kind of wholeness through asymmetry and time, the tension between impermanence and ongoing-ness.”¹

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Beloved spiritual companions – all of us, and all creatures, great and small,

May we allow ourselves
to be taught to shed our resistance
to the flux and flow of life:
to love,
to forgive,
to let go,
to bear loss,
to learn what else we can do to persist in this world,
to be at peace.

When we catch sight of our reflection
– in a window, in one another –
may we see persistence, trust, and grace.

May we be unleashed
in a field of love.

¹ Please see [nytimes.com/2016/12/07/opinion/the-three-legged-dog-who-carried-me.html?emc=eta1](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/07/opinion/the-three-legged-dog-who-carried-me.html?emc=eta1)