

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 29 September, 2019

The Blessings of Animals

I. The Dinner Party

“Opening scene:

... Some of the guests have already arrived and are racing around the [living] room, variously ... colliding [and] dancing around each other....

“Another guest arrives ... and rings the bell. Everyone runs ... to the door, ... excited beyond belief, [jostling each other, staring at the door, jumping on the door,] yelling, ‘Who’s there?! Who’s there?!’ The [new arrival] yells back, ‘Who’s there?! Who’s there?!’ Somehow, the new arrival enters and the party resumes....

“The camera [pans across the guests]....

“A muscular male dressed all in black ... carries a Frisbee everywhere, clutched tightly to his chest. If anyone touches the Frisbee, he whirls around abruptly and stalks off, glaring over his shoulder.

“Another [male], dressed in plaid, rather jolly, ... has a drooling problem. Every so often he shakes his head and [saliva] flies onto adjacent guests, who don’t even notice.

“A depressed-looking [female] ... spends the entire evening [in a] large, stuffed chair, ... methodically ripping it to shreds....

“A huge guy [in a] jean jacket and tattoos ... goes up to various [guests and just stands there. They] immediately [give him all] their hors d’oeuvres....

“A very small, [elderly female] with frizzy hair ... leaps out from behind the furniture at passersby and speaks sharply to them. Even the huge guy is daunted. [But] nobody [really] seems to mind [about any of this].

“Various bits of action occur:

“Someone emerges from the bathroom and everyone rushes over and crowds in to [find out] what’s happened.

“A guest, looking out the window, suddenly gets very excited and yells, ‘A cat!...’ Everyone rushes to the window and joins in yelling, ‘A cat! A cat!...’

“Two [guests] — one big, one little — grab an appetizer at the same time. They stand stock still, each holding onto it and staring out [of] the corner of their eyes at each other. Suddenly, the big one whirls around and tries to walk off with it. The little one, however, doesn’t let go and is flung around in the big one’s wake.

“In the kitchen, several guests have knocked over the garbage and are going through it. In the backyard, [other guests] are digging holes.

“A fight breaks out.... But it’s over in three seconds and the opponents [run off to play together].

“Several guests can be seen hiding bits of food around the [house]. They carefully scan for a likely spot, put down the food, then pick it up again and start looking for a better place.

“Dinner is served:

“Everyone races over to the table and there’s a big to-do while the seating arrangement is [sorted] out. Then all the guests eat as fast as they possibly can. Every so often, [a] guest simply grabs something off the plate of the guest next to [them]. Sometimes, [the guest] grabs it back.

“When everyone’s finished, they jump up and change places to inspect each other’s plates.

[And then,] after dinner, everyone takes a nap. They are sprawled around the [house], some in little groups huddled together; some on couches, on their backs with their feet up on the arms and flung over the back; some curled up

awkwardly in overstuffed chairs with their chins propped up on the arms. Occasionally, we see limbs twitching and hear little contented noises.”¹

II. Fred & Jordan: Who Rescued Whom?

“Jordan, a 12-year-old seventh grader, from Michigan, has alopecia: ... no hair, eyebrows, or eyelashes. In elementary school, he had friends and sleepovers and participated in sports.... But when he got to middle school, ... everything changed. He was bullied.... When another student took off [Jordan’s] hat and threw it across the room, [Jordan shut down and] closed off the world....

“[He] wouldn’t go to school, or [even go] outside.... He [just] didn’t want to be around people. [The once sweet, good humored], ‘let’s-do-this’ kid wouldn’t leave his bedroom. [Cheri Radlick] pulled her son out of public school, enrolled him in an online school, [and] took him to therapy [for anxiety and depression]....

“[Jordan’s doctor recommended getting an animal companion.] Courtney Protz-Sanders, executive director of Paws for Life ... thought she had the perfect dog for Jordan.

“[Fred is an] Australian shepherd/lab mix” who had been crated day and night — brutally neglected — and was in dire need of medical attention when Paws rescued him. He was now ready to go home with someone who could help nurse him all the way to health and socialize him ... and that someone was Jordan.

They are inseparable. They play together, sleep together, and are regaining their wellbeing together. Jordan helps Fred with the exercises intended to strengthen his legs; Jordan’s confidence has surged with Fred’s unconditional devotion.

“I can tell you from the minute Jordan got out of the car and ... saw Fred, it was love at first sight.... When they locked eyes, I knew. It was just unbreakable.”

¹ Erica Schoenberger and Melissa Webb Wright, “The Dinner Party: A Screen Treatment” in *Howl: A Collection of the Best Contemporary Dog Wit*. Please see dogtime.com/dog-health/general/1249-dinner-party-dog-essay

Cheri Radlick’s voice [cracks as she shares] the story.... My son was rescued by a rescue dog.”²

III. Tess & Joe: Home from the War

United States Army veteran Joe Steenbeke has Psalm 91 tattooed on his forearm:

Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;
nor for the arrow that flieth by day;....

A thousand shall fall at thy side,
and ten thousand at thy right hand;
but it shall not come nigh thee....

There shall be no evil befall thee....

Still he couldn’t sleep. He’d been home from the war for six years, and the PTSD was unrelenting. In Afghanistan, he’d served as a tactical explosives dog handler with Tess, a bomb-sniffing Belgian Malinois. Every minute in that hell, Tess and Joe were together: a unit, a team, family.

When his deployment ended in 2013, Joe was given only minutes to say goodbye to her: Joe came home to Indiana. Tess remained behind.

Joe’s wife, Stephanie — another hero in this story — began the years-long process to reunite the two veterans. In February of this year, with the help of Mission K9 Rescue, she finally made it happen.

A visitor arrives and sets a bag on the floor. Immediately, Tess hops up to sniff around it. Not sensing anything out of the ordinary, she takes a red ball and curls up on her dog bed.

² Christina Hall, “Neglected dog rescues bullied Waterford boy, now bond is unbreakable,” *Detroit Free Press*, 12/3/18. Please see freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/oakland/2018/12/03/neglected-dog-recues-bullied-waterford-boy/2164682002/ and blog.theanimalrescuesite.greatergood.com/bullied-dog-boy/

“She’s only been retired for two days now,” says Joe. “Of course she’s going to think she’s still working.... Veterans ... have to transition into civilian life.” But Tess has already made herself at home, claimed her toys, and acknowledged — then promptly ignored — Onyx, the family’s black cat, who, nonetheless, is keeping an eye on Tess.

“It’s been six years since I’ve had her and honestly, looking at her right now, it feels like it’s been a lifetime.... There’s a little piece of me that I didn’t really ever think I’d get back,” says Joe.

Stephanie adds, “I’d heard plenty of stories about her, but as soon as they brought her out ... as soon as I saw her, I started crying. And she just came right to him, just bee-lined right to him. Honestly, it’s like she’s always been with us. She came right in the house last night, she picked out a toy, she picked a bed, and she slept all night. It’s like she’s been here forever. [She] just fit right in.... but it still doesn’t feel real. I really ... can’t believe ... she’s ... here.”

Tess is now 11 years old. “We’re just looking forward to giving her a good retirement life,” Joe says. She’s worked so hard her entire life. Now she gets to sit back and have fun and live like an eccentric billionaire.”

And finally, Joe can sleep.³

Canticle

Blackbird ~ Paul McCartney

performed by Mark David Buckles (guitar) & Julie Metcalf (violin)

IV. Mr. Boo Saves the Day

Early one May morning in a Cincinnati suburb, a tiny, seven-year-old tuxedo cat, a rescue named Mr. Boo, began wailing in the hallway, waking his entire family. Mr. Boo “never even meows,” says Ariana Kecskes, his human mother. “He

³ Becky Malewitz, “Culver veteran reunites with service dog after nearly six years,” *South Bend Tribune*, 2/4/19. Please see southbendtribune.com/news/local/culver-veteran-reunites-with-service-dog-after-nearly-six-years/article_8921d4bb-2b2f-5ad6-9828-2b9ed916e1ac.html and Enjoli Francis and Susan Schwartz, “Army veteran adopts bomb-sniffing military dog he worked with in Afghanistan 6 years ago,” in *ArmyTimes.com*. Please see 2/4/19armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/02/04/army-veteran-adopts-dog-he-served-with-in-afghanistan

usually just squeaks or doesn't meow at all. It's actually kind of a joke in our family.”

It turns out something was wrong — potentially fatally wrong. As the Kecskes and their children emerged from their bedrooms, they watched as he continued to stumble up and down the hall, occasionally fainting and then rousing himself ... until he couldn't. Suddenly, they all began to feel faint. One of the parents called 911. “They all, at the same time, are fainting, including our cat who is the one who alarmed us.... My daughter fainted in the hallway, my son fainted on the back porch, and our cat fainted in the living room.... My son is on the back porch, just out of it.”

When the fire department arrived, they found carbon monoxide pouring into the house from a faulty boiler. The entire family, poisoned by the potentially fatal gas, was taken by ambulance to the hospital. “They were “minutes away from dying,” firefighters said. But they recovered and are alive today, thanks to Mr. Boo.

Due to his actions, Mr. Boo was honored by PETA with some catnip toys, a framed certificate, and a mountain of treats. “Mr. Boo knew that something was wrong and he didn't rest until he'd alerted his entire family to the danger they were in,” says PETA Vice President Colleen O'Brien.

Ariana Kecskes said, “It's like he's been waiting his whole life to do this one heroic thing.”⁴

V. Flannery O'Connor's Chicken

Born in 1925, Flannery O'Connor was a southern novelist, short story writer, and essayist. In 1972, her *Complete Stories* won the National Book Award for Fiction, and in a 2009 poll was named the best book ever to have won it. In 2015, the United States Postal Service honored her with a postage stamp in the Literary Arts series.

Flannery O'Connor didn't care much for any of it. She loved birds.

⁴ Kelli Bender, “Heroic cat, Mr. Boo, honored for saving family from carbon monoxide,” 5/22/18. Please see people.com/pets/hero-rescue-saves-family-from-carbon-monoxide/ and WLWT NE Digital Staff, 5/22/18. Please see wlwt.com/article/heroic-cat-mr-boo-honored-for-saving-family-from-carbon-monoxide/20869422

In high school, when the girls were required to sew Sunday dresses for themselves, Flannery O'Connor sewed a full outfit, including underwear, to fit her pet duck. The duck made an appearance at school to model the finished product.

Years earlier, it was a chicken that brought her joy. The local news filmed "Little [Flannery] O'Connor"⁵ with her trained chicken and showed the film around the country.⁶

Later, she wrote, "When I was six, I had a chicken that walked backward and was in the Pathé News. I was in it, too, with the chicken, but it was the high point in my life. Everything since has been anticlimax."⁷

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Beloved spiritual companions,

May the blessings of animals
fill our days and our nights
with high points:
laughter, companionship, courage,
and love.

And may we bless them, in kind.
Amen.

⁵ It was actually called "Little Mary O'Connor," Mary being Flannery's first name, though she never used it.

⁶ *Wikipedia*, Flannery O'Connor

⁷ Flannery O'Connor and Rosemary M. Magee, *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, p. 38