

The continuing importance of being stubborn

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Rogue was limping in the morning. He is our garden cat, who was a tiny kitten until February this year. By the afternoon, the limp was gone. And the nag inside me went away. I never had a bond with animals, until this past year.

It started with four shivering kittens one early October morning in 2016. At 4.30am I had no one to turn to for advice, and I couldn't turn away. I put a rug on them, and left a plate of milk. When I came back from my run, the milk was gone. And the kittens were chasing each other as only kittens can. They stayed on in the garden. We named them Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and Spy.

That is how I got involved with the life of cats and they got involved in mine. Independent creatures that they are, they would vanish and then return. Our garden was their home.

Then one day Spy died, crushed under a car, on the road outside. That is when I realized the beginning of a bond. Then Soldier died. And Tinker and Tailor never came back. We heard that someone from the neighbourhood had killed them. Why? And with the fire of that rage, the bond was forged.

Two weeks later, in January, we found two more of them in the garden. We called them Rogue and One. They grew up from their tininess into lithe, young cats.

One vanished in October this year. He used to nibble at my toes. I miss him. Rogue misses him. We grieve together. My mother says that when she was a child, and returned to her neighbourhood after three years, her garden cat came back. It gives me hope; One may come back. They say cats are not like dogs, they don't bond. You should have asked all six of them how they felt about my son. They can't talk, but I can see.

My life changed in this period. A world opened up that did not exist before. I also started noticing dogs. Many of you know this well. But to me the discovery of their devotion and love was astonishing. Neither of their own volition, nor forced by circumstances, will they leave the ones they love. Ever. We can't say that about us, humans.

It was sheer coincidence that I was reading research on animal behaviour. This rigorous research was on cognitive capacities, social behaviour and emotions, of animals ranging from dolphins and octopuses to cats and dogs. As I read more and observed the cats and dogs, it seemed possible that animals are much more human in every way.

I remember a conversation often. A colleague used an often-used, axiomatic statement. Education is about becoming human, so we cannot talk about the education of animals. Her response, from wisdom and greater knowledge of animals, was, “Don’t be so sure.” The comment was not about education itself, but about the assumption of categorical difference between animals and humans. Most people like us, shaped by modernity and the urban environment, think of animals and human as categorically different. What if they are not?

In this same year, the world has changed even more; the change in my life is nothing. Humans have done a lot to expand the boundaries of what it means to be human.

If a repeat child-molester can stand in elections for high public office, get the endorsement of the head of state, and lose the race by just about 1%; if the elected president of a nation can boast of having killed a man at 16, and it’s only one more news item on the ticker tape; if a man can be burnt alive, the video uploaded on YouTube, and there are public protests against the killer being arrested; if Twitter is the command and control mechanism for the world’s largest nuclear arsenal; if a neo-Nazi party can get 12.6% of the vote in Germany, while triumphantly proclaiming its bigotry; if someone can kill Tinker and Tailor, because they are cute kittens, we certainly have new norms for what it means to be human.

It is all around us. Though gathering for decades, it was unleashed with new force in 2016, bringing out blatantly the deep ruptures in the most fundamental notions of what it means to be human.

While we are bidding goodbye to 2017, the spirit of 2016 is not ending. And it will not end soon. We are still in the fight of our lives, for the good, the right and the truth—for what it means to be human. Since it is still the spirit of 2016, I can do no better than to write what I did last year (<https://goo.gl/9yOei6>)—an exhortation to be ziddi (stubborn) in this fight.

Hope or despair is ours for the making. If we stand away, we let in despair and weakness. If we commit to a shared moral purpose in action, then we strengthen the fight for the good.

When the good, the right and the truth are all unanchored and untethered, being ziddi, unrelenting under all circumstances, counts more than anything else. But being so alone is insufficient. We all must be ziddi together, to really put an end to the spirit of 2016, and not let another year like that arise.

In the meanwhile, we have demolished the categorical difference between animals and us, if it was ever there. So I can now modify the axiomatic statement in education.

Education can be about becoming a dog. I certainly would rather be a dog, perhaps a ziddi dog, than a human, if this is what it means to be human.

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