with an introduction by Seane Corn

spiritual wisdom from our feline friends

THE KARMA OF CATS

EDITED BY

DIANA VENTIMIGLIA

"*The Karma of Cats* is yet more proof that cats teach us to be better humans, and sometimes even save our lives. Read this book with a cat on your lap, then hand it to another biped in need of inspiration."

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AN ANTHOLOGY EDITED BY

DIANA VENTIMIGLIA

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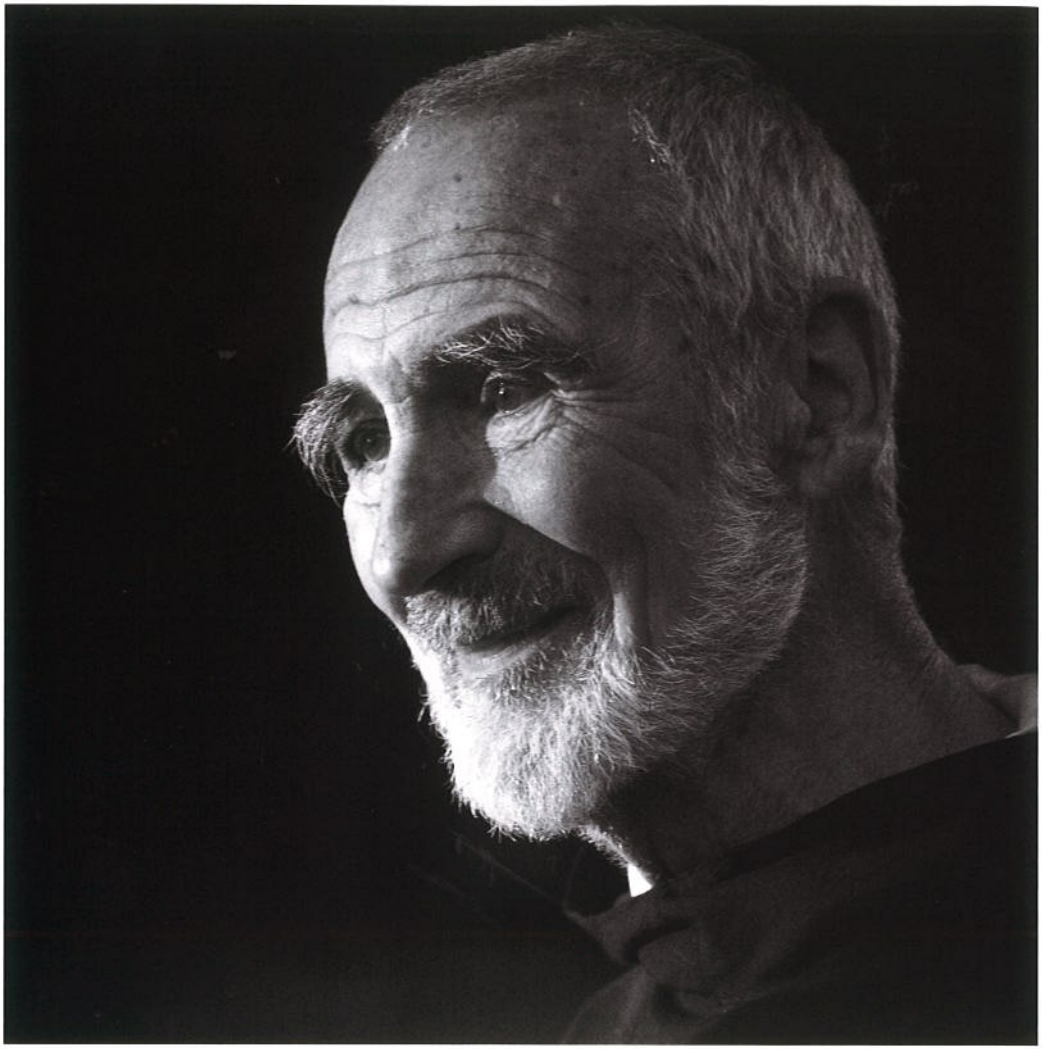
Contents



LEFT Brother David

Memories of Cats I Loved

Brother David Steindl-Rast

Clopatra (Cleopatra), 1940s, Vienna, Austria

My family had moved to Vienna, the car had been confiscated, and train rides were a nightmare. It wasn't the worst of the war yet. There was still glass in our windows and only a few small cracks in the walls from the bombs.

On an early, misty winter evening, one of us, I can't remember who it was, heard a soft meow in the john of our apartment; a cat had gotten into the ventilation duct. Well, it didn't take us long to liberate her, give her a good brushing, and find a name for her. Since a john is called *klo* in German, Clopatra (Cleopatra) sounded close enough to the humble place where she had first appeared, yet dignified enough for a cat—and this was no alley cat, to be sure.

We boys couldn't stop marveling at her appearance, and I mean both her sudden coming into sight and her sleek beauty. She was "at least Egyptian," we decided, and fully deserved her name. Her color was beige with an apricot sheen, and at points of special accent—her ears, her paws, her spine—shadows the color of precious wood glided over her short fur as she moved noiselessly. I cannot remember the color of Clopatra's eyes, or rather, every time I try to recall them, I see my mother's eyes instead.

We hardly could believe that Mother allowed us to shelter that cat. We were starving; where would anyone find food for a cat? The couple from whom we bought milk had the surname Spärlich, which in English means "skimpy," and that was an appropriate adjective for a family's

weekly allowance of milk. Not much later, the couple was killed by the bomb that destroyed their dairy, but at this time Mother could still go and put a few drops of milk on a saucer for Clopatra. We were speechless, which rarely happened to teenagers, then as now. None of the generous gestures my mother made throughout her life ever impressed me more.

Not only that. My mother put her rose-quartz bracelet around the cat's neck, and its beads seemed to change color until they perfectly matched the hue of the fur. Two days later, this apparition of perfect beauty, at a time when we most needed it, vanished again, but she left the rose-quartz bracelet on Mother's dresser, and in us she left a strange sense of having been graced by a Presence, a feeling stronger than the sadness of missing her.

At the end of the war, plundering soldiers made off with the bracelet. Was it for this that the cat had left her royal collar behind? But even when asking this bitter question, I could still see Clopatra lapping up those precious drops of milk, and in my memory, she had my mother's eyes.

Mietzi, 1980s, New York City

For millennia, humans have speculated why some of us are born into riches, others into rags. If we can't answer this question for humans, how shall we answer it for cats? Bad karma, you say? If so, Mietzi must have misbehaved quite badly in a previous incarnation to be born in a flooded basement this time around. No one knows. What we do know, however, is that the most disadvantaged pull most strongly on our heartstrings, and so someone rescued Mietzi and her siblings from their sunless island of soggy rags. No one ever mentioned the mother cat, and I don't know what happened to the other kittens of that litter. All I know is that little Lisa persuaded her reluctant grandmother, and so Mietzi became my mother's cat.

After that deluged basement, even a tenth-floor New York apartment that was never designed for pets must have appeared like paradise to the poor kitten. Or so we were hoping. Lisa delivered Mietzi in a soft-cushioned basket, and the cat was still sitting in that basket when, after an elaborate

farewell from the cat, Lisa kissed her grandmother goodbye at the door. The door closed, Mother turned around, the basket was empty.

That the cat was gone was bad enough, but her pitiful meow was not gone. It kept haunting the apartment for the next hour, while Mother, eventually with the help of her neighbors on both sides, searched every corner so methodically that Scotland Yard would have been proud of that job. The voice, unaccountably, always seemed to come from nowhere; yet it persisted.

When the ladies finally dismantled the Sony radio and hi-fi record player my mother won at a raffle, Mietzi emerged from the only place where she could have gotten as covered with dust as she did: one of the loudspeaker boxes. A bad start, especially since Mother felt that the kitten needed a bath. (There must have been lots of water signs in Mietzi's natal chart.)

No cat could have been more loved, more talked about in telephone conversations with children and grandchildren, more lovingly reported on at length in every letter.

Mietzi wasn't young anymore when Mother was diagnosed with leukemia. Mother was still at home, and I was with her during the decisive days when the doctor was testing whether or not medication could help her. I was sitting by Mother's bed then, when Mietzi seemed to get ready for an acrobatic stunt. Balancing on the back of the rocking chair, she was clearly considering jumping from there onto a high chest of drawers.

Never before had she tried this. Ears laid back, Mietzi was measuring the distance. "Is she going to make it?" I asked—and the moment the words were out, I realized that this was the question my brothers and I were anxiously asking about Mother at that time. "Let's see," Mother replied. Nothing else was said—neither then nor later—but both of us knew what was at stake. There was no tinge of superstition about this. Everything hangs together with everything; we know that. In principle then, we may look at one event and find in it a clue for quite a different one, unconnected though they may appear to be. Some try this with tea leaves or

In us she left a strange sense of having been graced by a Presence, a feeling stronger than the sadness of missing her.

planets; others think that, in practice, this is too complex an art. There are moments, however, when an omen lights up with such clarity that it would be difficult to deny its foreboding. Not wanting this to be true, Mother and I knew, nevertheless, what was going on here.

Mietzi steadied herself on the back of the rocking chair, crouched, jumped, and missed. Have you ever noticed the embarrassment of a cat when something like this happens? We tried to console Mietzi, Mother and I, but we couldn't quite console ourselves that evening.

The verdict was in. What was not decided was how we would handle it, and that is what really matters.

Mother handled it with grace. Two days later, she was in the hospital again, never to return home to Mietzi. Her mind was clear to the last, as she took care of unfinished business calmly and efficiently. She knew in which folder important papers were kept, in which dresser; she handed my brother the keys with a smile. Only once did she break down and cry: when Mietzi's future was to be decided. But a solution was found: since Mother's apartment was at the same time the office for her charitable work, which my brother would continue, Mietzi could stay where she was. The "super" of the building, who was fond of Mietzi anyway, would look after her when my brother wasn't there. Mother was at peace.

I sat next to her bed holding her hand, and she said, "This is how I'd like to die. You ought to sit there holding my hand and I'd just fall asleep."

"Well," I said, "I'd like that, too, but we can't plan it with such precision." Not many hours later, I was sitting in that very spot holding Mother's hand when she went to sleep for good. So peacefully did she breathe her last that there was no telling exactly when she passed from time into the great Now.

Mietzi outlived her by a year or two, mercifully among her accustomed surroundings: the potted plants on which she nibbled once in a while, the old rugs of which she knew every square inch by their smell, my mother's empty armchair on which she curled up when she got lonely.

Smokey, 1990, New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur, California

"Cats are little people in fur coats," somebody said, and this is true of all cats. Applied to Smokey, however, a statement like this would sound far too condescending. When I dream of her, or even when I think of her with my left brain wide awake, Smokey is not little, not smaller than I; she is my equal, my companion, my colleague, even my teacher. When other cats carry on a conversation with me in my dreams, I'm always a little surprised; with Smokey it would surprise me if she behaved like a mere cat.

When I first saw her, it was her outward beauty that fascinated me. That was at Adam's cottage where Smokey would sit on the fence, a gray shape shifting from one elegant pose to another still more elegant one. There was not a flaw in her evenly silver-gray coat, and the balance of her ever-changing outline was equally flawless. On closer inspection, her fine nose and the twenty balls of her toes were evenly black, her eyes tangerine, and the skin underneath her coat, when one parted her fur by daylight, was sky blue. Only the little rosebud of skin under her tail was pink.

Carthusian monks in France, I later learned, cultivated this breed of cats that Crusaders had brought back from North Africa. Maybe five hundred years of selective breeding caused Carthusian cats to lose their voices, or maybe they were chosen in the first place for being talented mousers who wasted no time talking. In any case, they keep monastic silence better than some monks. Smokey was a master in the use of the silent meow. She'd look up at you with eyes that could pull on anyone's heartstrings and mouth her request inaudibly. When Adam had to be away in the hospital for a long time, he asked me to feed Smokey. I fed her at his place, but she made herself more and more at home in the cell where I lived.

After Adam died, I inherited Smokey—with no contestants to his last will and testament. Smokey herself was old by that time, though no one knew how old. An eccentric lady in Carmel, who had befriended Adam, kept Carthusian cats. I wrote to her, but she was around ninety then and couldn't remember if she ever gave Smokey to Adam.

Gradually, Smokey herself began to show her age. She'd sneeze a great deal, and Dr. Dummit, putting a stethoscope to her chest, said, "Well, I'm no vet, but I can hear all sorts of alarming noises

in there." One night, Smokey lay down on a shelf where I'd never seen her lie before and seemed unable to move even her ears. She seemed more than half gone. I blessed her with an image of Saint Martin de Porres, who founded the first animal hospital in the world—in Lima, Peru, in the century after Columbus. Then I put my hands on her back and channeled all the blessings of aliveness into that limp body; I did this for two hours or more. Then I carried the motionless body to Smokey's place at the foot of the bed, slipped under the blanket, and fell asleep.

Several times during the night I woke up; Smokey was still motionless in the same spot. In the morning my first thought was a question: *What will I do with the dead cat?* Hesitating, I opened my eyes. Smokey opened hers at the same time, arched her back, yawned, and jumped with one leap from the bed to the floor. Obviously she had lost only one of her nine lives.

When she lost the ninth one, I happened to be thousands of miles away in the Austrian Alps. A telephone message informed me that she had died on Brother Kieran's lap. He was my neighbor and friend and took care of the cat while I was away. On that afternoon I got only the message. Long afterward, when I returned home, he was reluctant to speak about Smokey's end. That was all right, since I was reluctant to ask. They had buried her in the garden where she had hunted among the lavender bushes and rolled in the crabgrass. Julian sandblasted her name into a hunk of serpentine I had lugged up from Sand Dollar Beach as a grave marker for Smokey.