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Some People Are Just As Equal As Others

Ursula K. Le Guin

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This photograph illustrates something I've been thinking about cats, dogs, and people. And about Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.

We know that dogs, descended from wolves, and having lived domestically with humans for as long as 30,000 years, are for the most part deeply hierarchical, conceiving of society as a pyramid with The Boss (Alpha Male, Master, Mistress, God, King, Leader) on top and other beings arranged in descending order beneath. Obedience to authority and acceptance of one's place in that social and moral order is right behavior.

I believe that cats, descended from semi-social or asocial wild cats and having lived domestically with humans for probably less than 3,000 years, have no concept whatever of a rightful hierarchy of social or moral authority. It does not occur to a cat that any other being has any right, other than might, to its obedience, which is offered only out of immediate self-interest or personal affection. Cats are intensely opportunistic, practical anarchists.

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What we see in this photograph, taken by an amiable human willing to get down on his belly at floor level with the cat, is that the cat accepts this willingness as unworthy of special notice. The cat considers himself on a level with the human, whether the human is towering six feet above him or is flat on the floor with him.

Knowing that the human is a stranger, although a quiet, well-behaved one, and is ten times larger and stronger than himself, the cat shows no alarm, but some rational distrust. He offers no welcome, slits his eyes, sets his ears at alert, gives nothing away, and simply looks straight at the large intruder upon his territory.

This is the level gaze of one who does not conceive himself as inferior to anybody — who sees himself as the social equal of anyone he meets.

I don't say the *absolute* equal. Size matters. Pard grants me a certain authority: there are places I forbid him to go and things I prevent him from doing, and though he tests these sanctions often and sometimes disobeys them, mostly he accepts them. I think he does so because he trusts me, is fond of me, and is very much smaller than me. If he weighed 120 pounds instead of 12, he would be lot likelier to assert his equality with me by disobeying my orders.

Relationships of trust and affection that involve a balance of power are never simple. We work them out as we go along, individually and by species. Generalizations lead to assumptions that are often misleading, sometimes fatally so. After all, an 80-pound dog frightened or goaded into aggression, or who has been trained and encouraged to attack, is as dangerous as any leopard.

That so many of us can't see the cat's level gaze as a declaration of equality, but see it as contemptuous, arrogant, even threatening — as declaring superiority — signifies that, like wolves and dogs, we simians are hierarchs. We want power to be assigned to certain individuals once for all, not to pass

around among us according to circumstance. We make permanent niches — Higher, Lower — and fill them. Creatures who won't stay in the niche we put them in frighten or anger us. The gaze of equality from a small, speechless, furry creature is read as the intolerable challenge of an inferior claiming superiority.

I said cats are anarchists, but a society of equals is also, after all, a democracy.

The cat-human connection, historically an almost entirely practical, utilitarian one (with occasional fits of worshiping the cat as a divinity) in our time has come to include powerful bonds of intimate affection, unconditional, as between equals. I like the idea that from these subtle, intense companionships we might have something to learn about the nature of our own politics, our difficulty in achieving, even conceiving, genuine equality.