

**BLESSINGS GIVEN, BLESSINGS RECEIVED**  
**May 6, 2007**

Most of you know that I am enamored of cats. You heard stories of Joshua of beloved memory. You heard a little about my current cat, Kaidu, who was rescued by my daughter when she (the cat) was a pregnant adolescent. Today I want to share some stories about Sua-Lai, the Siamese.

Sua-Lai entered our lives when we were living in Germany. She was a pure-bred Siamese, complete with brown points, a lithe, athletic body, and slightly crossed eyes. When we returned to the United States from Germany, Sua-Lai had to be shipped. This was a traumatic experience for all involved. My husband, children and I entered the U.S. in Philadelphia, where we picked up a new car, visited some old friends, and then drove to Pontiac, Illinois to visit my family before proceeding to Fort Benning, Georgia.

Sua-Lai was shipped directly to Illinois. My father agreed to meet her at O'Hare Airport and bring her to Pontiac to await our arrival. He went to the location we were told to look for her. He couldn't find her. Now, my father had lived with cat-lovers all his married life, and he knew that he could not just go home and report that Sua-Lai was lost. He persisted in searching through the maze that is O'Hare Airport until he located her in a freight storage area. It seems that she had been inadvertently shipped to Toronto, Canada instead of O'Hare. She was then put on a train and sent to the Chicago airport.

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Already there is a lot of trauma. If you are familiar with cats in general, and Siamese in particular, you know that they often do not like to travel. Siamese are especially loud in their displeasure.

When he got her to my parents home in Pontiac and opened the cage door, she immediately shot through the only open door she could see—which was, fortunately, the door to the basement. She crawled into a dark, secure area, and stayed there for the week it took us to arrive. My mother, who loved cats, took her food and water, and supplied a cat box.

When we arrived, Sua-Lai allowed my daughter Tina, her favorite person, to pet her, and eventually carry her upstairs. She was trembling with emotion—that I guess to be a combination of fear, rage, and relief. She was loud in her expression of these emotions.

She had begun to recover some of her poise when it was time to pack up for the trip from Northern Illinois to Fort Benning. When the carrying cage appeared she attempted an escape, but was caught and placed in the car. It is 825 miles from Pontiac to Fort Benning. Sua Lai yowled her Siamese yowl the whole way. Not only did she yowl, but she shed.

Now, I am not talking about normal shedding. I am talking about excessive, over-the-top expelling of hair. .... In my husband's new Ford Taurus. ... carrying three children, and a husband who did not care for cats as much as the children and wife. It took two days to get there. Tina and I worried that she would have no hair left! The only time she did not yowl and expel hair was when we

stopped for the night, and she had time to calm down a bit. It was traumatic for all concerned.

2

Sua-Lai was with us for many years. We learned to serve her well, even moving her food and water to the top of the refrigerator when a collie puppy joined our family. We served her, and yet she gave us many, many gifts.

Although our animal companions differ in species, and within species, they all give us gifts. There are three that I think are present whenever you choose to share your life with an animal companion. They vary in depth and quality among the species and within the individuals in each species. However, let us focus on these three: the gift of affection, the gift of humility, and the gift of expanding our hearts and souls. Let us explore these gifts.

Sua-Lai was much too independent to casually reveal her affections, however, they were there. I mentioned that Tina was her favorite person. Sua-Lai always knew when she was coming home. She jumped in the front window when she heard the school bus coming. She might be casually licking her well-groomed coat when she walked in—but she always jumped down and greeted Tina by rubbing against her ankles.

However, cats are not the species that is best-known for displaying affection. Let me ask you now—what species do you think shows its love for the humans in its family the most?

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There is nothing like a wriggling puppy to melt hearts..... 2

Scientists tell us that because they are essentially pack animals, dogs will assume that the humans they live among are their pack, and treat them accordingly. The trick is to make sure that the dog recognizes that one of the humans is the leader of the pack. If the dog assumes that role, it will probably be an unhappy pack.

Those of us who are cat people know that the affection of a feline must be earned. It is not automatically given. When it is then bestowed we value it greatly. Other creatures also display affection. Jessica's pet rats were the first I met. I was somewhat startled to realize that they showed affection toward her, and she to them.

The second gift is that of humility. When I watched Sua-Lai easily leap from the floor to the top of the refrigerator, I was humbled. I am not sure what the equivalent distance would be for humans, but it is far beyond the ability of we two-legged creatures to make even the top of the refrigerator, let alone the same distance in human measurements. She was far more graceful than I, and her coat, unlike my hair, was always impeccably groomed. And it darkened with maturity, rather than growing lighter!

What are some of the things that your animal companion can do that you cannot do?

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How do you feel when your dog/cat/rat/bird does \_\_\_\_\_ that you cannot do?

A little dose of humility is good for all of us.

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The third gift is that of expanding our hearts and souls. It may be a little more difficult to explain and understand. Creatures are wired to love their own kind. A human person learns to love his or her mother and father. They learn to love their siblings, and then their friends. Learning to love across species is not so natural. We may appreciate a puppy for his playfulness or her cute behavior. Humans first brought cats into their homes to take care of the mice and rats that infested the space. They were useful. We admire birds for their song and their colorful feathers. However, learning to love these creatures requires us to grow our hearts.

Love requires more than admiration or appreciation. It requires that we take the responsibility of caring for the needs and wants of the other. Therefore, young children must be taught not to pull the cat's tail, or continue trying to play with a worn-out puppy. We are required to walk the dog, change the cat litter, and provide either fresh or salt water for the fish. We are required to get the correct shots to immunize our animal companions against disease. We are required to provide the correct kind of food. And we are required to provide medical care when our friends are sick.

Accepting these responsibilities is a sign that one's heart has grown. And when the time comes that one's loved companion is sick unto death, we are required to make the difficult decision—is it time to let him or her go? It is then that we must ask ourselves, “what is best for my companion?” We must explore the options, try to determine the quality of life, and decide what steps must be taken. Walking this path with a loved companion is not easy. However, it is a path that forces us to grow our souls.

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How many of us have had to take that road? How many of us stood by the side of a loved animal companion as the light left his or her eyes?

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It is a sad task. However, it forces us to deepen our souls, to pay more attention to the things that make life worth living, and to learn that saying goodbye is part of loving.

Our creatures call us to serve them. And, when we respond, we are given many gifts. They bless us with their presence, and we bless them with our love and affection. May we all, animals and humans, receive the blessing of companionship from each other, now and into the future.

Shalom and Saalat.  
Blessed Be and Amen.

