

Joe Kadi

Daily Worship

I'm writing this essay within the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuu't'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bears paw, and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

A gift fell from the sky. While engaging in my regular practice of the ancient Arab tradition of cat worship, I found myself—most unexpectedly—at peace with my Arab identity. See me in the bright, early-morning glimmers of Canmore, Alberta, sunlight flooding through large window onto pine table, tangle of Engelmann spruce trees visible outside that window, mountains beyond. See one dilute tortoise shell cat on my lap, one on the chair beside me. Emma licks yogurt from my fingers, Bronwyn cleans the plate in front of her. See me worshipping these two creatures.

Worship is a strong word, and cat worship a strong phrase. In this day and age, with so many humans disconnected from other creatures, and from faith, it may ring strangely. Not for me. Blessedly, I've always felt a link to the spirit world, to the creatures we share the planet with. Cat worship feels entirely appropriate. To worship means to revere and adore holy beings; to express this with rituals, ceremonies, and prayers; to move into the spiritual realm.

But how does the spiritual realm lead to peace with racial identity? Especially for someone who has struggled with damage wrought by racism's external forces and internalized beliefs? Ah, therein lies the mystery, to misquote Hamlet. *I cannot explain it. But I have experienced it.*

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These feline worship patterns began decades ago with my first cat, Orlando. I initially considered this a personal eccentricity, shared with a few other cat people (we never use the word “owners”). Then I learned an exciting truth: this is part of Arab culture. A teacher, sharing tales of a recent trip, stated, “evidence

of cat worship still exists all over Egypt.” I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Arab cat worship? That still existed? Oh, yes, she assured me, showing me her statue of Bast, or Bastet, the Egyptian cat goddess. Bast takes us back 3,000 years, to a place where female power, cats, the moon, and celebration of fertility merged. And there’s the direct connection between the Muslim faith and cat worship, which began with Muhammed. Our ancestors worshipped felines for their beauty, their healing power, and their spirituality; they believed cats intentionally sought us out when we prayed. And they appreciated cats for keeping mice away from precious books and rats away from precious grain.

As my teacher claimed, remnants of cat worship persist in the Arab world. On my first day in Beirut, in 2014, cutting across a side street toward the Corniche, I noticed a group of apartment buildings with a courtyard in the middle. Dozens of cats occupied the open space, cleaning fur, basking in sun, sleeping, sitting regally on haunches, and casting practiced eyes over the land. “Wow,” I thought, “who trained these cats to get along?” No one; these strays had figured out how to share territory. They didn’t look like strays, because they were well cared for. In some neighborhoods, including this one, people pool money to buy cat food, while elsewhere one person foots the entire bill, even if that wrecks havoc on personal finances. A professor at the American University of Beirut told me that several folks get attached to particular cats and routinely smuggle them into their offices. One evening my group attended a play at the AUB amphitheater; the doors were left open for the cool night air. An orange and white cat strolled around the theater, testing everyone in order to find the best lap. Not a person refused her. I don’t believe I was the only disappointed person in the room when she finally settled down — with someone else.

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Two felines expressed intense interest in the yogurt-making procedure, scrutinizing my every move as I leaned into the pot to embrace the scent of steaming milk, just as my grandmother had done, as I held pinky finger in milk and counted to ten to make sure the milk had cooled enough, just as my grandmother had done. And every morning, two felines peered expectantly at me when I entered the kitchen. Emma and Bronwyn, my dilute tortoise shell cats — “rare,” the vet told me in a thrilled voice, “rare, and said to bring good luck” — with orange and white swirls mixed among the gray background.

On those mornings, I experienced a continuation of what happened with my other felines; a sense of love and connection, a sense of rightness and holiness. With one important addition this time round: I felt a sense of contentment with my racial identity. Not because I’d been searching for it or working toward it. No, the contentment simply arrived and plunked itself down. In retrospect, I believe this had started, slowly, with previous cat worship experiences, and now, with Emma and Bronwyn, it had come to consciousness. They helped

bring me home.

Sitting in the sunlight in that kitchen, sharing yogurt, I felt the presence of holiness, a space pregnant with possibility and grace. Cat worship took me inside a particular spiritual tradition, reminded me of the importance of integrating love, compassion, and goodness into daily life. Each morning I felt the presence of the cosmic force, sometimes through Emma's habit of tilting her head wistfully to the side and looking off into the distance, sometimes with Bronwyn's plaintive eyes gazing directly into mine. And there was the night. Typically, in the deep quiet of 2 a.m., I woke and gazed at them for long minutes. Often they were curled together in a yin and yang position, a full circle in which it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. I didn't look so much as gloat. Not maliciously or smugly, but in an awe-filled way at this miracle of inexplicable good fortune. I would sink my face into their fur tangle and breathe them into me, my heart expanding beyond its boundaries.

Bronwyn and Emma linked me directly, every morning, with my ancestors. I'd catch images, quick glimpses: an elderly man in a sparsely furnished dwelling, stroking a black cat. A statue of Bast, with feline and human adherents encircling it. Once, Cousin Sadie's face flickered. A member of my grandparents' generation and cat worshipper extraordinaire, she grudgingly complied with family members' stern injunctions to limit her quota to three felines.

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Racism as a system has remarkable endurance. It's not just overt actions done by the dominant group, it's the way racism works its way into our bodies and takes up residence. That's why my stomach still tightens when I hear the word greasy; I've been catapulted back into high-school corridors echoing with "greasy Arab." Why my breath gets shallow when the — always white — news reader announces in the — always earnest — tone that there's been another "terrorist" attack by you-know-who. Why I sometimes hear, out of nowhere, a decades-old whisper: "dirty Arab." Why my shoulders hunch forward when white-man-saves-Arab-woman is enacted one more excruciating time on the silver screen.

Yes, racism has remarkable endurance — and let us not forget that we have our own remarkable analysis of racism and strategies of resistance. We have figured out that communal activities, focused on advocacy and activist work, provide a strong counter to internalized racism. We know that affirming racial identity for all of us — refusing, for example, to emulate the dominant group's standards of who the "authentic" Arabs are — is another strong counter. After decades of this work, we understand internal shifts are complicated and time-consuming, and may not happen in a straightforward fashion. Older shame can exist at the same time, in the same body, as a newly formed positive belief.

Perhaps strengthening racial identity can best be understood as an ongoing practice. Just as cat worship is.

Effort, planning, and intentionality must continue to be part and parcel of our resistance, as must our commitment to a spacious understanding of this work, one that allows us to follow our own inclination and intuition. Whether educating, lobbying, strategizing, painting, writing, singing, or marshalling at protests, we acknowledge the many valid approaches to the work of dismantling racism. As I think about the positive spillover in my own life that resulted from engaging in cat worship, I wonder about expanding the space further. About intentionally acknowledging that there is mystery and possibility, grace and hope, in this political work; about intentionally acknowledging the presence of surprise and unpredictability.

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To shatter means to break violently, and this is what happened to my heart with Emma's sudden death. As I stumbled through the ensuing months in a bewilderment of raw grief, I'd clutch Bronwyn close and gaze at her with stunned unblinking eyes. Bronwyn's presence was instrumental in leading me out of that rawness, back to an ongoing feline worship practice that sustains me to this day, still weaving through my life and my struggles in known and unknown ways.

In worshipping holy creatures, opening ourselves and allowing connection to go deep, we take tremendous risk. If things go awry in some unforeseen way, we suffer. But with this risk also comes the opportunity to find ourselves, to love, to experience the realm of the holy, to live close to spirit. To receive gifts that were not worked for, not anticipated. As happened to me, during those precious months spent at a pine table in a sunny kitchen. See me experiencing a quiet sense of trust in who I am, in who we are. See me experiencing a sense of being enough. See me, another Arab, worshipping cats. ♀