

## Equals

My cats are precious to me. I love that they do not see me as the boss. They see people as their equals. You do not pick a cat up. They come to you. Cats don't come when you call. They grace you with their presence when they so choose. Cats don't obey. They openly defy you just to see what you will do about it. Being their equal means they have added no more responsibilities to my life full of responsibilities.

I do not want to be responsible for anything more than I already am. I am responsible for helping my students learn. I am responsible for checking in on my mom, getting her groceries, making sure her house stays fairly clean and her yard trim, her nails are cut, her prescriptions picked. I am responsible for shopping and cleaning and laundry and paying bills and scheduling repairs and planning holidays and vacations for my family. I am responsible for being there to listen to and wisely advise my family when they need me. I am already at the tipping point. I couldn't handle any more responsibility. Sometimes I want to run away or hide, so I can be alone.

Now I know that I will be really sad when I am not needed any more, when my mother is no longer alive, when my kids are grown and gone, when I have retired from teaching. But right now, I look forward to those rare days when my husband has taken my son hunting, my daughter is in Ann Arbor visiting a friend, my sister has come into town and is staying with my mom, and there are no papers to grade. Then when I am alone, I get to do what I want and go where I want and see who I want. I like to go for a long walk or ride my bike up to the cider mill on the trail. I like to sit on the porch in the evening once I have worn myself out and watch the wind blow through the pine trees in the backyard. And this is when I am most grateful for my cats. Because I am alone but not alone.

When I am gone on my bike ride, the cats don't miss me or need me to get home at a certain time to feed them or let them out. But when I ride into the drive way it never fails that they are there in the window watching me ride up. They are on the step into the kitchen when I walk in from the garage, not jumping up for pets or asking me to play, but just happy to see me. When get a cup of tea and go sit on the porch, they are there already. One might sit on the ledge slowly closing his eyes and smiling when I look at him in that way cats have of saying, "I love you." As I sit back on the chaise lounge, the other will come curl up next me, one paw on my leg and his chin on his paw. He will start to purr, and his purrs make me feel like I am purring. They came to be with me just because they wanted to. We are all just happy and quiet. And there are no "have to"s.