

Little Boots

The blind kitten I adopted seemed to walk by faith instead of sight—the perfect companion to take to divinity school.

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue



When we saw a container of Kentucky Fried Chicken dancing in the middle of the street, my husband and I stopped to investigate. Out of the box crawled a terribly skinny kitten with long black fur and bright white paws. She had been making the box dance as she tried to lick out the last crumb. She purred as she leaned into me with her whole body. We named her Little Boots.

Little Boots thrived on cat food, a trip to the vet and lots of love. But she remained very small—and displayed some odd behavior. She would act as if she were sneaking up on our other cats to attack them, but she was in plain sight, right in

front of them. By the time she pounced, the cats had moved away. She couldn't figure out how they knew she was coming.

It was only when we found her walking on a second-story porch rail, precariously sticking her paw out into the air as she felt for her next step, that we realized the obvious. Little Boots was blind.

From then on, that cat became my hero. Nothing stopped her. When she ran into a wall, she would turn back and run the other way. When she walked into a piece of furniture, she remembered where it was the next time. She didn't sit still. Her little white paws were always out in the air in front of her, testing, searching for her next foothold.

Little Boots seemed to walk by faith instead of sight—the perfect companion to take to divinity school. We moved that little cat to four different apartments, and each time she had to relearn the lay of the land. Each time she had to adjust.

In my last year of divinity school, when I was pregnant with my first child, I learned that Little Boots had a critical medical condition. My husband and I were grad students living on loans; we had no money for expensive treatments that might or might not work.

I became so despondent that I couldn't eat. At eight months pregnant, I stopped bathing and changing my clothes. With hormones swirling my moods like a bad cocktail, I examined my rotten life and asked the hard questions. How would I take care of a baby when I couldn't even provide for my cat? How could I choose between savings and helping a little blind creature? Where was God? In the end all the questions had the same answer: I was in no position to bring a new life into the world.

Yes, I had faced greater tragedies in life than the loss of a cat. So there was a part of me that observed myself falling into melancholy with enormous judgment of myself. Of course, that didn't help. I could add "self-indulgent and self-pitying" to my list of problems.

I would watch Little Boots asleep on my pregnant belly, rising and falling with my breath. The cat was clearly slipping away into more and more sleep. Given that I was not fit to be a pet owner and was going to be a terrible mother, it became clear to me that I'd be a terrible minister as well. But I dragged myself out of the house to

school, where I was pretty sure nobody would want to sit next to me since I didn't want to sit next to myself.

"We've taken up a collection," Maureen said one day as she pushed a thick envelope of money into my hand after chapel services and gave a stern look at my dirty clothes. It was like the envelope that drug dealers slip furtively to each other in television crime dramas. When I opened it, I saw hundreds of dollars. "It's for Little Boots," she whispered. "Now you can take her to the vet."

I did not know Maureen very well. She was a middle-aged biologist who wore small wire-rimmed glasses and sensible sweaters. She taught at Yale Medical School but for some reason had decided to study divinity. She had always struck me as logical, scientific, intelligent and not particularly emotional. Yet she had taken up the collection. Was she just a passionate animal lover? Or a passionate people lover? I never got to ask her. I rushed back to give my husband the news that Little Boots had been rescued. We went to the vet with the envelope full of anonymous donations.

It turned out that the treatments did not work. Little Boots slipped serenely away to her next destination as she lay in my husband's arms. But as sad as we were, we were left serene as well. We were not haunted by the thought that we could have done more. We had done what we could, not because of our own power but because of a community that decided to pitch in—and the Holy Spirit that runs through it. I had wondered where God was, and God had shown up.

I was able to turn my attention back to preparing for motherhood. I regained my appetite and—fortunately for my husband—my desire to bathe. While what lay ahead of me still seemed impossible, I knew I wouldn't have to do it all myself. I was not alone in this big adventure.

I thought often of Little Boots, my role model for the easygoing traveler. She was always ready to adjust to her surroundings. She traveled light and was open to anything. Her long cat stretches were nothing compared to her inner flexibility.

And of course she did not overexamine her life. She had the benefit of being a cat. But she also seemed to be a particular kind of cat, one that expected the world to be a loving and delightful place. Unable to see the pitfalls ahead, she stuck out her paw to feel her way. While she couldn't see what was ahead, she seemed to trust that she was surrounded by love. And of course she was.

When I think of all the creatures I have loved and lost, I realize that although I thought I was taking care of them, they were taking care of me. I think this is what God had in mind. We're here to look out for one another.

Eighteen years later, the baby I was carrying is heading off to college. In some ways I feel as helpless to protect him as I did back then. But I know now that his welfare was never up to me alone. There has always been a cloud of witnesses, a community to step in and make this hostile and lonely world a loving place worth exploring. As my son prepares to go out into the world, I think of Little Boots, who walked by faith and not by sight.