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Our kitten – technically an adolescent at about six months – is roughly one-tenth the size of our dog. But she is not deterred. She races toward him, jumps to swat his nose, lands and springs quickly to grab the dog’s tail. She does this without trepidation. The dog allows it, a reaction somewhere between tolerance and disregard. The cat repeats the move. Often. Every day.

The cat’s name is Chinotto, which is a bitter, dark-colored Italian soda made from juice of the synonymous citrus. Our Chinotto – or Kiki, as she is called by everyone but me – is neither bitter nor dark. Rather, she is precocious and adventuresome (even reckless) and full of spunk.

Jenna observes that if Kiki is unfamiliar with a thing – inanimate or, perhaps, living – she’ll approach it and give it a swat to engage. Kiki is more interested in what she can learn from the encounter than fearful of the potential risks. She is good-natured and strong-willed, but she knows what she wants, and she is unapologetic about it.

I admire her curiosity and courage. She never stops trying to figure things out, even at her own peril. She’d rather experience a thing than worry about it. She is results oriented. Rather than scaling the top few steps to the next floor’s landing – the obvious and easy route – she leaps through the stair spindles across a narrow three-story chasm and lands harshly on her two front paws on the slippery wood floor on the other side. She chooses excitement over ease.

Kiki hasn’t developed a standard “meow.” Rather, she chirps, like a baby bird. She might not understand that she’s feline. She skews human, I’d say. When we found her under our front steps, she was alone. She is an inside cat now, and her immediate family consists of two people and a canine. She perches at a front window and watches the world go by. Given the city center surroundings, her reference living beings are people, who pass in a steady stream. It’s all she knows.

Kiki has boundless energy. She wrestles for hours with

tiny things, like a felt cartoon taco toy, for one. Every tussle with the taco ends in a well-played draw.

She is social; she values connection, she understands that she needs it to grow. She doesn’t yield easily. Faced with probable failure, she tries a thing again and again and again, undeterred. The possibility outweighs the frustration and pain.

She’s a little naughty. She does a thing and subsequently seeks forgiveness with her expressive eyes. It works on me every time. Jenna is a more pragmatic guardian.

She tends to ignore her limitations. This is a trait of a joyful pet and all great creators of things. It’s the differentiator between common and great.

I’ve come to realize that our animals better us in many ways. They serve as mirrors and metaphors, if we’re looking. They soften us; they trigger our caretaker instincts. They make us kinder than we might otherwise be. They are entertaining, too, and fun to be around. And they love

naturally and without self-consciousness.

Kiki is the cat I didn’t recognize I’d been missing so much. As I’m writing, she’s darting, then pulling at a rug. It’s okay; it’s just a rug. But to her, it’s five minutes of exercise and exploration and synthesis and fun. For both of us, actually. Meow.

Scott A. Lauriat

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