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Lessons Learned and a Guilty Confession

Thu, 2011-12-08 16:51 — Robin Olson

The more I work and live with cats, the more I realize how little I know. After years of fostering and having a house full of cats, you'd think I'd be an expert, but today I learned yet another valuable lesson.

At the beginning of my rescue career, I volunteered with a rescue group in southern Connecticut. I did some design work for their events and eventually began to naively foster cats, as well. After all these years, I have no interest in bashing how they do what they do, but I can say that it was very tough to get my foster cats adopted once they came to my home. Now that I have to approve applications for my group, Kitten Associates, I realize how difficult it is to find just the right adopter...but I also don't let my cats languish in foster care for YEARS, which was a common occurrence back in those days.



©2003 Robin A.F Olson. Gracie with Annabelle, Scooter Pie and Petunia.

My first foster cat was Spencer and he's our CiCH Mascot . When he joined the family, I only had two cats and one had just passed away. On Christmas of 2003 Spencer's adoption was formalized. **It was a meaningful adoption because not only did I help rescue this cat, but now he would be mine for the rest of his life.**

The next cats I fostered were an abused mama cat and her three newborn kittens. Two of the kittens were confident, playful, easy to love. They got adopted together, but their sister, didn't show well and would run off and hide. I didn't understand at the time that I should have shown her in a small room where she couldn't hide. She was perfectly friendly with me, but in a big room with loud people talking away, no wonder she ran off.

Since applications weren't coming in and I was still quite the sucker for taking in cats, I said I'd just keep her. What the heck. Her Mother wasn't getting any interest because she was an adult already, so I kept her, too. I felt like I didn't have any other options at the time. Their adoption wasn't very meaningful.

Those cats are Gracie and Petunia.

I don't often write about Petunia. She's 8 1/2 years old now and I'm reluctant to admit, is not my favorite cat. She pees around the house some times. She's neurotic. She gets attacked by Spencer, Blitzen and now, even the DOOD. I've taken her to the Vet MANY times; dealt with any health issues as they come up. I spoke with a cat behaviorist. I tried homeopathy. I changed things around in the house so Petunia would have a place where she could feel safe, **but I was always bitter about all the fuss I had to make over her when all she did was flip out over the littlest thing, drool on me if I petted her and sneak attack some of the cats while they slept (because they attacked her when she was awake) .**

Over the years I've come to resent her being here. She just causes trouble. **I HATE that I have to admit this and I feel very guilty. I never should have kept her.** I didn't have that bond I had with her siblings or her mother. I felt like I got stuck with her and I've been trying to make the best of it ever since.

Even though it was right in front of me, I couldn't see the good things about her; the way she would "talk" to me if I talked to her. she could do some tricks, she loved to play if she could be on her own to do so, she really loved me, but I was indifferent. **How cruel I have been.**

I considered re-homing her. She wasn't happy here. We weren't happy she was here, but her mother, Gracie, has to be with her. They are far too bonded for me to separate them now. Gracie is skittish and has health issues. Who would want these two cats?

So Sam and I made an concerted effort to be kinder to Petunia and she did respond, but the same group of male cats kept going after her! We would yell, try to break it up, but every night this would go on and the stress on ALL of us was not good.



©2008 Robin A.F Olson. *The girls.*

Then I met up with a friend of mine who is also a cat writer. Her name is Wendy Christensen and she's the author of MANY books about cats. She's also an artist and jewelry designer. Her ETSY page is [HERE](#) ^[1] and [HERE](#) ^[2] are illustrations and some of her [books](#) ^[3].

Wendy told me that she had a similar problem-male cats going after her female. She took her cats to the vet. The vet couldn't find anything wrong. He kept thinking about this seemingly mysterious problem, some might call it Pariah cat, where one cat seemingly for no reason gets picked on by the other cats in the home. After all I've read on the subject, my short comment about that is I'm not sure it's a fair description or even that it exists at all (*more on why another time*).

He called Wendy and asked her to bring her female cat in to have its' anal glands expressed. **He had a theory that if the glands were very full that the cat might give off an offensive odor that made the male cats react to.**

Sure enough-the cats glands were full up. **He expressed them and the cat stopped getting attacked!**

Once I heard that, I knew I had to try it. Now, remember, Petunia is NOT easy to handle. **She overreacts to getting her claws trimmed.** It would not be easy to get her to the Vet, but it had to be done.

This morning I took 'Tunie to see Dr. Larry. Because I know that a small, dark place helps cats feel safe, I kept Petunia in a covered cat carrier and tried to keep her very quiet until it was exam time.

Dr. Larry and I discussed what was going on. **He agreed that anal glands could give off scent that the males went after. He also confirmed something else I'd heard-that cats with urinary tract infections/issues can also emit an odor that other cats can smell. Petunia has had UTI issues, but was currently clear of them. I had to hope, which sounds weird, that her anal glands were full up.**

I asked Dr. Larry if we could turn off the overhead lights, then keep Petunia covered during his exam. By the dim light from under the cabinets, Vet tech Amber held Petunia's scruff and Dr. Larry went to work at the other end.

We all kept quiet or just told Petunia it was "okay" and that she was a "good girl." 'She was fairly relaxed until Dr Larry hit the right anal gland. **Petunia started to writhe and screech. I asked Dr. Larry if he could take a break and he replied that once you start, you have to finish. He worked quickly. I couldn't see if he was expressing anything or not.** If it did smell badly-which it should, I wouldn't have known. The day before a dog had come into the clinic. **He was bitten by a SKUNK and BLASTED by the same! The whole clinic smelled like skunk a day later.**

In a few minutes, the procedure was done. **Petunia relaxed and Amber and I both petted her and told her she was such a good girl! She reacted so well. Normally she would have been climbing the wals, but this time she was calm. I realized that how I treat her definitely affected how she responded at the Vet.** Keeping the lights low; keeping things quiet-that really did wonders.

I couldn't wait to hear the results. Did she or didn't she?

One of Petunia's two anal glands was VERY FULL, but the other was "HUGE."

Dr. Larry described that normally expressing the anal glands results in a watery brownish discharge. Petunia's was black, thick and tarry-and very difficult to express. **It's VERY LIKELY that Petunia has been in quite a bit of pain for a VERY LONG TIME.**

On one hand I was thrilled at the news, but on the other hand I felt very guilty and ashamed. **My poor cat-all this time I've been thinking she's a royal nuisance and I wished I could just re-home her. I was tired of all the fights and her screaming in the middle of the night. Maybe a lot of what was going on had to do with the fact that she was in PAIN and that she smelled bad to the male cats.**

I took the back road home, driving slowly along the river. The sun was brightly shining and I pulled the cover off Petunia's cat carrier and glanced over at her. She didn't make a sound. She rubbed against my finger when I pushed it through an opening on the side of the cat carrier. **I told her again what a good girl she was and for the first time in a long time, I believed what I was saying. I felt real affection for her and real hope, too, that maybe, just maybe she was on the road to a better life.**

When we got home, instead of running off in a frenzy, she jumped on the sofa and laid down in the sun. I checked on her a few hours later. She was still there. **Normally, if she saw me, she'd sit up on alert, ready to run off. This time I could see contentment in her eyes.** She was relaxed and happy. I reached out to pet her and she rubbed her head on my hand, again, instead of running off.



©2011 Robin A.F Olson. Petunia this afternoon.

I sat on the loveseat a few feet away from her. I saw Blitzen come over to her. Normally he'd sniff at her, then do this strange sort of dance where he'd rub his head against the leg of the table, then in a few moments, charge Petunia and corner her somewhere. **This time he just sniffed at the air, then seemed to change his mind. He walked away .**

I don't know if we've solved the problem. It's way too early to tell and I don't know if the cats are so used to going after Petunia that they'll still do it or if she has other issues we haven't yet discovered.

What I do know is I love my cat and I'm so very sorry. I'm sorry for her pain and her unhappiness. **I've always felt she deserved a better home and maybe now she'll have one here.**

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Comments

Thu, 2011-12-08 17:01 — Kitty Mom (not verified)

I imagine it took courage to ^[20]

I imagine it took courage to write this post and admit your own discontent, but you may have done a great service to other kitties in the same position whose people don't understand their behavior and don't know how to make things better. I hope so :) So very glad that Petunia had at least a little peace and contentment. I hope it continues indefinitely!

Thu, 2011-12-08 17:17 — [Bobbie](#) [21]

She is [22]

Beautiful, and the picture of her and Gracie is so, so pretty.

I hope things will work out for her there :)

Thu, 2011-12-08 17:28 — [AnnaMeow \(not verified\)](#) [23]

Great story!!! [24]

Thank you for bringing the anal gland problem to light. This is such great information to know! I hope Petunia now smells as sweet as a flower to all the males and enjoys a much happier, hassle free, pain free life!

Thu, 2011-12-08 17:53 — Lisa (not verified)

Well, gosh, I never would [25]

Well, gosh, I never would have thought of the glands. How on earth were you to know this kind of thing! I've only had one cat who gave me any sign she had this problem and it was the way she was holding her tail. I still remember hearing the screeching from her in the back when they did the "expressing" and thought I hope to God I never have to do that to her again! Don't beat yourself up. You couldn't have known and once you learned of this possibility you got her examined and now she'll be happy and you'll have this info for the future. You're a good cat momma and sure sounds like Petunia is not holding it against you.

Thu, 2011-12-08 19:10 — Penny (not verified)

Thank you! And Petunia! [26]

OK - Now I need to know EVERYTHING about those "villans"! Is there any way for us lowly owners to know if "someone's" glands are being a problem?

Thu, 2011-12-08 22:07 — [Robin Olson](#) [27]

How to tell... [28]

That's the PROBLEM! "Lowly" (certainly not!) or super experienced owners can't tell because you know that cats mask pain VERY effectively. It's how they survive in the wild. There are some instances where the cat will literally drag it's behind on a rough surface to scratch at or try to open up the anal glands. Dr Larry said that some dogs will CHEW their rear-end OPEN if they are uncomfortable. Perhaps you might see extra licking in that area, but really, I didn't see a thing on Petunia AND...as a matter of course, I have also had MANY of my other cats checked and most of the time they were ALL very FULL. This may be due to them not going outdoors. Cats use their anal glands to mark territory. It can also be due to diet, genetics and stress. For as little as it generally costs to have done, it's worth the trip to the Vet to make sure. once you know there's a problem, you can set up additional vet visits to keep your cat comfortable. Hope this helps! Let me know what you find out!

Thu, 2011-12-08 19:16 — AZDEB (not verified)

Thank you [29]

Thank you for sharing that experience and Petunia's story, gives me more info to tuck away into my mind if something unusual comes about with my crew.

Thu, 2011-12-08 20:01 — [Sally \(not verified\)](#) [30]

Petunia [31]

There's always something to learn when it comes to cats. As I've written, I have my "problem child." At times he frustrates the hell out of me, but every day with him is a learning experience. Petunia is beautiful (I have a soft spot for gray kitties), so perhaps now that the emotional baggage has been somewhat lifted, you can better appreciate her beauty.

Fri, 2011-12-09 01:16 — [Jeanne B \(not verified\)](#) [32]

The Extra Cat [33]

I understand completely. One of my five isn't my favorite, either, but he was a package deal; one of two surviving orphaned kittens my 94-year-old well-meaning former neighbor couldn't really take care of after Momcat got out of the house and was squished. I'd learned of the kittens during a friendly over-the-fence chat, and offered to help out since he didn't know quite what to do with them.

They wound up moving to my house to be fostered. The goal was that when they were "ready", I could keep the blue one (who looks like Petunia, and whom I'd fallen for instantly) and my neighbor would keep the fluffy one. At "ready time, his daughter intervened and suggested it might be better if I took both. That was seven years ago.

The fluffy one, Tyler, was an adorable but neurotic baby kitten who has developed into a grossly obese Jabba the Cat with serious chronic urinary crystal issues and a nursing fixation. I'm afraid to weigh him—he has to be 20 pounds. He'll nurse my old shirt (with me in it), make biscuits and enjoy being petted... until suddenly he doesn't want to be petted and starts biting. I can't touch him anywhere, he gets really upset unless it's on his terms. He gets wild eyes, and he's really quite obnoxious. He's the most bitey, clawy cat I've ever had and the scars... I almost missed driving to my sister's for Christmas last year because he was settled nearby and got spooked by two others who got into it, and suddenly there was a ricochet of cats and my ginormous beast used my knees as a launch pad. Bruised and shredded, stiff and painful for several days. Like I'd been Tanya Harding'd with a spiked baseball bat. The scars are still visible.

Sometimes I feel bad that I don't have the same connection, but he wasn't supposed to BE my cat. He was supposed to go back to my neighbor, so I raised him but held him at arm's length and tried not to bond too much so it wouldn't be hard when I had to give him back (I tend to get way too attached). My mistake. I should have indulged him like I did his brother, who is (don't tell a soul) my absolute favorite cat ever. Maybe he wouldn't be so neurotic, and maybe I'd feel more loving toward him.

And there is my confession.

Fri, 2011-12-09 06:59 — MK (not verified)

I have 2 pain in the butt ^[34]

I have 2 pain in the butt cats. One, I cant touch..she pees outside the box when she is upset about something..a couple other cats pick on her. But I love her and would never dream of giving her up. Besides being picked on by a couple others, she is very bonded with 2 cats and I think she is happy.

My other pain in the butt pees outside the box at times as well, just because she feels like it. She doesn't really have any friends..her choice. I felt she hated living at my house, so I tried to re-home her..no luck. I love her though..I tell her she is a pain in the butt, but she doesn't care.

I will have my vet look at her anal glands though the next time we go.

Petunia is a beautiful cat..I hope the other kitties stop picking on her.

Fri, 2011-12-09 13:15 — Northmoon (not verified)

Always more to learn from our ^[35]

Always more to learn from our animal companions, especially since they can't explain to us what is going on with them. Thank you for sharing this experience.

I hope everyone gets along better now, including you and Gracie!

Fri, 2011-12-09 20:04 — [thecatguy \(not verified\)](#) ^[36]

yea for Petunia and for you! ^[37]

I sure hope this is the answer to harmony in the house and even if it is not it sounds the experience really opened your heart to Petunia. The adoption is official now, because she has a part of your heart.

Thanks for sharing the story, both from the happy ending standpoint and the info on anal glands part.

Thu, 2011-12-15 19:11 — [Lee County Clowder \(not verified\)](#) ^[38]

purrrrrring for Petunia ^[39]

Purrrrrring that Petunia gets along better with everyone after this. She is a gorgeous kittie, and deserves a good home.

For the adventurous amongst you, there is a youTube video out there from something called [vetstoria \(or Vets at Home\)](#) ^[40] titled [Anal Glands \(2\): How to express them?](#) ^[41] that shows you about what you would expect a title like that to show. You might want to think a second or two before you watch that video.

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