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## Holding Steady

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# Holding Steady

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*Bill Elgersma*

Age does funny things to people. At twenty we set out to turn the world on its head. We know everything; we can do everything, and we can do it quickly. By thirty, many of us have figured out how to function with a spouse—sort of; we are big enough to admit we *do* act like the parent that drives our spouse nuts; we have kids; we don't know so much; we don't do things as quickly. Things like minivans, mac and cheese, Kool-Aide, Freezy Pops, and kiddie pools consume us, and we can sing along with Lois and Bram or the Bernie song, depending on where we live. By forty, we have morphed into the middle-aged uncles and aunts we used to snicker about—weird Uncle Tom with the toupee and the horse laugh; Auntie Deedee, who is three axe-handles wide and sports a moustache; or Cousin Alfred, really an uncle from grandpa's second marriage but too young to be an uncle so we make him a cousin—that's us.

We watch the kids survive high school, and as fathers we glare, stare, growl, and sneer at the punks circling our daughters. Our wives stop wrestling our sons into the shower because they are now old enough to personally realize the benefits of hygiene, and we get ahead of the bills but not out of the woods. We are breathing easier though.

By 50, the kids are gone. They have jobs; they have experiences; they make decisions without consulting us, and they don't come home much. We worry about them, and they are content not to think about us. If they do, it is in a way that intends not to have us find out what they are up to.

If there is one thing I really hate about the odometer rolling over to 50, it is the realization that

our bodies are showing wear. Perhaps because the past thirty years have been a race for survival, we have been too consumed by living to realize what has been happening to us, but at fifty, some bell in some little building that monitors the age of men goes off with an incessant clanging. Fifty means physical—the real physical—not this blood pressure and heart rate, weight, how-you-feeling, and do-you-have-any-concerns medical exam that suits me just fine. I didn't grow up with much faith in doctors. After all, you don't go to a doctor because you are healthy.

At 50, I realize that all of this has come back to haunt me. Scales don't lie, which means I don't want to get on; so, the nurse and I have a five-minute debate as to why I should. Finally she tells me that without the physical, the prescription will not be filled and so I step up. Leverage trumps principle—50 is not subtle and it does not negotiate. From there I am ushered into a room where she wraps the cuff around my arm and checks my blood pressure. She's a great nurse, but she gives me no preview—no advance warning. When the doctor arrives shortly after, he comments on my numbers and tells me I am on the edge of a pill parade to get the blood pressure back down. He would also like me on a diet of cardboard and grass. I tell him it is coaching hockey that affects these things—he tells me it is my genetics and being me that is responsible. That was last year.

Calendars increase in speed around 50, and this year the date has snuck up on me. I had been hoarding medication to avoid the physical, but it finally ran out. At that point I called the clinic and asked someone to write the prescription because my doctor was out of town, but either he or

the nurse was one step ahead of me. There was a note in the folder: *no refills*. I have no choice; I have to go in.

A week later, the nurse and I go the usual rounds about getting on the scale, and after the *tete de tete* she mentions that my weight is about the same. She gives me an appraising glance that suggests I am getting healthy. I say nothing; the weight is not my concern, the blood pressure is. If my blood pressure is not down, I am on meds. All I can think is, "Hurry up, it is climbing as I sit here." She wraps the cuff around my arm and pumps the bulb. I don't know much about blood pressure, and I don't pay attention to the numbers either. Sad to say, at a recent family reunion, one of my sibling's opening lines was, "so what's your blood pressure?" where upon two of them immediately compared numbers while I just shook my head. Not a real conversation starter in my world. Fifty.

Anyhow, sitting there waiting for the doctor, I think back over the past year and the changes in our life. Our kids have travelled to foreign countries and then returned again. We have seen them go through relationships, jobs, personal turmoil—life is in flux. My schedule is only consistent in its inconsistency, and my wife's job has us leaving notes on the kitchen table daily.

The only constant in our lives is the cats. Regardless of what else has changed, when I arrive at home they greet me at the front door—either with a reprimand for not putting out food or a meow that says it's tea time. They rule the place, but they give us a reason to come home.

I am not a cat person—never was. Growing up on a dairy farm, cats were tools, not unlike cows. No one keeps a cow out of sheer joy of company. They give milk—you either drink it or ship it. Heifer calves were either kept to be part of a later milking herd or sold off, and bull calves were either sold or castrated and named something like Pot Roast or Stew Beef so no one lost sight of their purpose. While cats did not serve in quite the same capacity, you fed them milk so they would hang around and catch the mice that ate the feed. The better ones killed rabbits that nibbled the vegetables, and the really good ones killed rats. The odd one liked to be petted but early on in life they

realized they were livestock with a role that did not include companionship: chickens lay eggs; cows give milk; cats eat mice. Barn cats, kittens included, are wild and bite little boys who may think they are cute. It was survival of the fittest, and I often bore the scratches and bites to prove I had no place in their hierarchy. That was a long time ago.

In the here and now, considering the cats, I think about sleep—50 is mean to sleep. I drift in and out several times per night. Going to bed early is bliss; however, most nights I see the clock on the chair that says 3 a.m. in bright red numbers. It has already shrieked but I was awake before its cry, waiting with a somewhat begrudging anticipation. The sound of my wife getting ready for work filters through the mostly closed door, and then the rumble from the garage door emanates through the house. On the oak floor I hear click, click, click. Nothing suspenseful here, one of the cats is arriving. The volume of the click identifies the cat. Buda lumbers into the room with the thud of a junior high male trying to navigate his morphing body while Buni clicks softly, ten pounds lighter and certainly more delicate. The noise emitted is almost more revealing in the dark. While Buda just launches and lands beside me, Buni arrives with a prissy mew that reprimands, as if to say, "I thought she would never leave," and then crawls in and scours the bed for the most strategic position. An extended arm is the desired location, and she curls up against my body, beneath the outstretched limb, sticks her nose in my ear, and purrs while she sleeps. Buda strategically falls on me and barrel rolls to land with his head on top of the other arm while his body half-sits, half-lies, tucked in beside me. Shortly after, I can see his white paws alternately rise in the dark, pawing the air while he roars in contentment to my scratching his belly. Buni's contentment can be measured by the extension of her front paws into my skin. As she falls into a deep sleep, the claws knead me like a baker kneads dough. By morning I look like a pin cushion. Happy cows? Huh—I got happy cats.

We are not pet people, at least I am not. Our pet resume is not good. Early in our marriage we purchased a house—a deal that included the previous owner's dog. That one slipped past us, but the house fared better than the dog. Shortly after the

previous owners left for parts unknown, the proprietors of the business beside us knocked on our door to tell us the dog was chasing customers back into their cars. How to win friends and influence people—the dog had to go.

Two dogs later, a puppy that moved our daughter's heart met a station wagon on the blacktop beside the pool. Burying a puppy with an eight-year-old is not something I want to do again. No pets, no way. Boris, a wonderfully friendly Siberian female husky, was a brief blip on the screen for about a week until we found out that she hated cats, mistook the neighbor's dog,—more like Kleenex box than dog actually—for a cat and promptly chewed him up severely enough that the cries drew me from the house in a hurry. The owner took a dim view of Boris and made noises about the leash law, so Boris left.

With those experiences, we realized dogs were out. Something that required training did not fit our profile. Hence the cats. Buni came from the bank along with Buda. Really. A veterinarian walked into the bank one day with a box under his arm and said, "How many barn cats you want?" with a sort of "want fries with that?" quality to his voice. Clothed in his work overalls, the green ones with the snake wrapped around the sword that vets wear—an inauspicious sign relative to cat distribution—he wasn't really asking; the felines were going. Looking into the box, my wife, in a moment of weakness said, "Two." And so we got two barn cats—rather kittens. Fifty will do that to a person.

A curious strategy in our house works like this: not unlike the pioneers of the Plains, I am left to discover. I came to that realization late one night when I drove onto the yard in the freezing rain to find the Volvo launched into the middle of the field. Nothing was said, just the car at an odd angle, nestled in the shimmering grass—sort of like a monument to the weather. Similarly, after a recent blizzard, going out to the garage, I found one of the cars buried to its axles in the snow—going nowhere—but again, nothing said. So, when I came home, no one around, to discover kitties in the house, cute as ever, I was not surprised. But seeing images of hairballs dancing in my head, I opened the door and said, "Out. You are cats, live like cats. To the barn. Earn your keep." I sounded

frighteningly like my father.

Outnumbered in the gender count at our place, I was soundly booed by wife and daughters, but I held my ground. I was not about to be displaced by two adorable balls of fur who leap on each other spontaneously, chase leaves, wrestle newly planted shrubs to the ground, and knock the heads off marigolds. Kittens hitching rides on clean laundry flapping in the breeze is highly entertaining. However, for those of us who walk into a room full of students unaware of the paw prints on our clothes, the sentiment does not last.

Still, I lost this one. I admitted defeat the minute I tried to name them Diesel and Cyclops—one for roaring instead of purring, the other for an eye infection that glued the eye firmly shut. So two kittens joined the family, and two daughters proceeded to spoil them. As my two daughters went back to school, I became the keeper of the cats with more than a little protest. I brought them water; I bought them food; I fed them daily. What did I get out of this? Two cats and, like many wonders of the world, the evidence of the power of time and persistence. I began to look like river rock—those round, smooth stones that have been tumbled for eons by the water, which wears down the edges.

Fifty does that to a person as well. For better or worse, I took to blowing the horn before backing out of the garage. Yes, they moved in from the barn to the garage. I lost that one too while on a weekend in Colorado with the hockey team. I came home to an open door, a dish of water, and a Tupperware container of cat food situated directly beside my table saw. I took the water dish and the Tupperware back out to the barn without comment to the family, all the while educating the two balls of fluff on what the term *barn* meant, but they had chosen the garage for a bedroom. Habits form quickly, and breaking them is hard.

The word *acquiesce* means to accept without protest. It has become my middle name. Over time I came to accept the arrangement, and the cats took to waiting at the window in the garage for me to wander to the barn to prepare their breakfast. However, when winter arrived with snow, they decided that snow was not for walking in and insisted I carry them. Alerted by the creak of the storm door, the cats would peak from around the

corner and wait for me to enter. Sitting on my work bench they would meow as I approached and then leap across the space to fasten claws in my jacket. “To the barn” they pointed, “we need food.” And so I trudged through the snow drifts, two arms full of cat with a flashlight in my mouth. Being raised on a farm, we had chores morning and evening—real chores where cattle were milked and fed. I have often wondered what my father would think of me, two cats fastened like burrs to my coat, floundering in the snow to the barn, to feed them. Not a credible beast in sight.

However, my perspective on the cats changed the following spring. One day I was slightly moved when Buda came around the corner of the barn wearing what looked like a handlebar mustache. He was probably eight months old and trotting proudly. When he came closer, I realized that he had not been into the cobwebs; instead he had caught a snake. I was impressed. No one had taught these cats how to hunt, but somehow innately he realized that if it moved, he could catch it and kill it and maybe even eat it. Three snakes later he decided he didn’t much like the taste, so he just caught them and killed them, leaving souvenirs for us to find stretched across the driveway or the porch. He caught on to hunting early; in the animal kingdom, he lives by the mantra, “If it moves, I kill it.” Lightning bugs at sunset put him in a frenzy. Buni was less interested. If Buda caught it, she might sniff, but rarely did she eat. She had decided to become a house cat and learned the cry that evoked pity and opened doors.

One of the great things about being around for a while is the value of experience. At 50, I have become culturally adept and socially conscious. To that end, occasionally I protest the gender-discrimination issue that seems to be directed toward Buda. Now, at about two years of age, he weighs about seventeen pounds, and Buni weighs seven. He is huge and strong and heavy. What is worse, when he rolls over on his back to have his belly scratched with all four paws in the air, he resembles a medium-sized dog. Putting his outstretched paw on my face and flexing his claws, he scratches most of my face. But he doesn’t mean to hurt me. He just loves people, and he is curious. Recently

my wife announced that she *may* have painted his toe nails pink. He was examining her feet while she was doing her nails, so he sat there while she did his. He gets tossed out of the house for jumping into the fridge when the door opens, riding the lazy susan in the corner cabinet, climbing into the dishwasher for leftovers, and reaching the counter top with his paws when fully extended, while Buni gets to stay because she is the queen. Honestly, I don’t think Buda cares, but I feel the need to represent him. He has purpose: he catches, kills, and eats anything he can, except the snakes—the original reason these two became part of the family. But I lose.

Sitting here in the clinic as I wait for my doctor, I realize—this is life at 50. Not much going on in our world, and the cats certainly have become center stage. Although I have never understood people who include pets in their Christmas photo, I have grown attached to these two. Now, I don’t put sweaters on them, and there are not cat beds in the house, but I admit I do talk to them. They don’t answer, but that is not important. I do a little victory dance when Buda deposits his latest lunch offering on the deck, and I create space so Buni can sit on my lap while I grade papers—they may as well be on the Christmas picture. When the doctor comes in, glances at my chart, and asks what I have been doing to get my blood pressure down, I tell him I don’t know. Nothing has changed in the past year except for a few more miles on the car, an increment on the pension plan, a few more wrinkles, and the cats.

Driving home, I think I know why I am holding steady at 50. The cats don’t care about the score at the end of the game, the officiating, or the win/loss record; they don’t care about job title; they don’t care whether the grass has been cut diagonally or whether it has been bagged or mulched; they aren’t worried about living in the right neighborhood, and they are not worried about how the pants might make them look. About the only thing that matters is water in the dish and food in the bowl. And if I come up short, they go out and find their own. Life is pretty simple.