

AN EASYGOING ESSAY

Relax. It's The Calico Cat. *How to stay cool in college.*

By Stephen Hill

A calico cat lives on my university campus. You could call her a stray cat in the sense that she doesn't have a home, but that's not entirely true. I see her on most days, resting beneath or around a pine tree near one of the residence halls. Students will often leave her fresh water or small cans of tuna. Sometimes she's curled up into a fuzzy ball, asleep; sometimes she's sprawled out upon the grass, soaking up the rays of the sun; sometimes she's sitting upon her haunches, silently watching the students who pass her by.

I like cats. Whenever I have a moment, I'll pause to pet that calico. She always reacts in the same way, at first, meowing softly and drawing her head away from my outstretched fingers, as if she is familiar with abuse. But it doesn't take long to coax her forward; soon she is nuzzling my hand and rubbing her body against my legs, letting out a slightly rasping purr that sounds like a delicate instrument inside her.

There are days when I don't want to trudge back to my dorm and leave that cat behind.

I've spent the past four years living and studying at Concord University, and the last has also been the most difficult. I often feel as if I'm not making any progress with my work; whenever I complete a major assignment, like an essay or a book report, another is sitting patiently on my desk, waiting for me to start writing it.

I've been working hard for months, enduring days without food and nights without sleep, and my nerves are shot. Three years ago, I was enrolled in a stress management course - a yoga class - that was meant to help me cope with the pressures of college life. All I ever got out of that course was a strained back.

I've thought about quitting, about dropping out of college and simply going home... but then, almost as

if on cue, that calico cat will cross my path. The cat doesn't care about my grades. It loves me, wholly and unconditionally, because I'm kind enough to pet it. If I don't turn in my homework assignments, that cat will love me. If I fail a test, that cat will love me. If I flunk out of every class I've got and set my textbooks ablaze, then as far as that cat is concerned, I'm an A-plus honor student. The cat won't chastise me or give me deadlines to meet; she'll keep right on nuzzling and purring because I scratch her between the ears.

I can't please everyone, but I can please that cat. She doesn't ask for much.

I know there are other students who are just as stressed out as I am, and frankly, I don't know how they manage to avoid going stark raving mad. Here's a bit of free advice for them, and for you:

Relax.

Sure, it can be difficult, but it's the best medicine for stress. Chill out. Take some time to unwind; how you do so doesn't matter. Read a book. Go for a walk. Break something, if it'll make you feel better. Some people like yoga, but I can't personally recommend it. If you can find one, pet a cat. Trust me, I've done it, and it works wonders. Take care of yourself before you take care of your assignments; Walt Whitman and Mark Twain can wait another few minutes so you can enjoy a fresh cup of coffee.

I'll be graduating from college less than two months from now. When I finish writing this article, I'm going to walk outside and find that calico. I'm going to stroke her fur and scratch between her ears until she purrs for me. I'm going to thank her for teaching me to relax, and for teaching me that grades and exams aren't the only important things in life.

I hope this piece is as enlightening for you as that cat was for me.

