

Kids Learning Center Story: Aubrey's Big Idea

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Aubrey's Big Idea

story of the month

By *Richard W. Jennings, the author of Orwell's Luck
"The Master of Middle American Whimsy"*



Aubrey, the second smallest child in the sixth grade, checked out a book about Saint Francis of Assisi from the library at Sunflower Middle School. Titled Saint Francis of Assisi, A Life of Joy, it was quite short and had many lovely illustrations. It had been written by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. In the book, Mr. Kennedy said that Saint Francis, who lived until 1226, was once called "the happiest man in the world," in part because of his love for all living things, and is widely considered throughout the world as "The Patron Saint of Animals."

Because Aubrey loved animals, too, she had a special fondness for Saint Francis. When Saint Francis's feast day, October 4, happened to fall on the same Saturday that the small Wisconsin town in which she lived planned to hold its annual fall festival, Aubrey suggested to her new father that he ask the mayor to let it include a celebration of everybody's pets.

"Splendid idea!" said Reverend Gordon.

"Splendid idea!" said Mayor Beagle. "And you should be the one to give a blessing to any pet that shows up."

"Sure," agreed Reverend Gordon, "but what if some bite?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Mayor Beagle answered with a chuckle, shaking Aubrey's new father's hand limply while gazing out his office window at Community Park where a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel was sniffing a police officer's trousers.

"Easy for you to say," replied a worried Reverend Gordon.

The day arrived.

Everybody Aubrey cared about showed up, plus a lot of people she didn't particularly know that well. Some people can be very picky about friends and Aubrey is among them. Someday, however, when she's older, she'll change her mind. It's a natural part of growing older, especially for Aubrey, a little girl with a very big heart.

But today it wasn't the people who were most important to Aubrey, it was that the pets outnumbered the people. There were more little black noses than you could cover a sneeze at.

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Aubrey's grandfather came all the way from Florida with his new Jack Russell Terrier, John. Uncle Gordon came with his JRT named Squirt. As expected, Bean brought Sophie, Owen and Jozie, the locally famous three singing dachshunds. To Aubrey's great surprise, the widow who lived next door brought a once-wild possum named Bob. Aubrey's mother, Anne, came bright and early with her Ocicat, Cupid. Heidi Nordström, Aubrey's sixth-grade homeroom teacher, brought an Amazon parrot named Cuss. Cuss was old enough to run for Congress, but who would ever vote for him given his foul temperament and constant screeching, Aubrey could not imagine. Perhaps Miss Niewald would, Aubrey thought, if she remembered to vote.

Aubrey herself arrived promptly on that special Saturday with Porchie, her orange tabby, a former neighborhood stray; Little Biscuit, a mixed-breed canine gift from Uncle Gordon; a devoted pair of zebra finches named Snow White and Prince Charming that Aubrey bought from old Mr. Biddle, a local finch breeder, plus the finches' four young children, Happy, Doc, Sponge Bob and Grumpy. Understandably, Aubrey pulled a wagon.

Kids from all over town brought dogs and cats with names like Wags, Fuzzy, Fido, Bingo, Spot, Skip, Shep, Sweetums, Champ, King, Buddy, Dog, Winn-Dixie and Miss Meow the Third.

Mr. McMahon from the bank brought a white rat named Chester. Mrs. Hartmann, principal of Sunflower Middle School, carried a box containing a bearded dragon, a pet as docile as he looked scary. She called him Dickie, after her late husband Richard.

The cute little Christine, the one girl that Aubrey considered to be a threat against her blossoming friendship with Bean, showed up with a forlorn parakeet named Budgie, the bird that had disrupted Aubrey's mother's wedding. The celebration began with a song led by Mrs. Magee. Everyone chimed in. It began with a four-line refrain interspersed among five delightful verses about mountains, rivers, sunrises and sunsets, winter winds, summer suns, gardens, trees, meadows, birds and flowers.

How could you not like a song with ingredients like those?

The procession toward the blessings of Saint Francis stand-in Reverend Gordon continued with an English Springer spaniel named Parker and three English pointers, Marshall, Shelby and Queeny, all the personal property of Mr. and Mrs. Smith, an English couple themselves; a rabbit, chinchilla, mouse, raccoon and domesticated codfish named Fiver, Pedro, Mickey, Bandit and Michael, respectively, pets of various



residents of Busch, Hodge, Per-Simon, and Wallow Streets; and Dr. Baker's trained seal Kendra, named for the lovely grown daughter of the recently divorced Mrs. Kelly.

Aubrey stepped from line to speak to Christine.

"I know why your parakeet Budgie is unhappy," Aubrey said.

"And what might that be?" Christine inquired coldly.

"Budgie needs a friend -- a mate. See that pink bulge above her beak? That means she is a girl. Girls of nearly every species dream of finding the perfect boy."

"Thanks for the uninvited advice, Aubrey," Christine replied, "but I think you need to work on your own situation." A silent, insulted Aubrey reclaimed her place in line where she'd left her wagon full of pets.

Behind Aubrey stood an itching fifth-grader, Daniel Deronda, who arrived without a pet but at the last minute had hastily removed a handful of busy workers from a colony of black ants.

"I didn't want to miss out," he explained, scratching the back of his neck just below the hairline.

Reverend Gordon, sensitive to the variety of beliefs represented by the multitude of pet owners in line, spoke to each animal in turn, sprinkling them with sparkling mineral water. Porchie found this spritzing especially uncomfortable and responded by flattening her ears.

As the celebration of the pets continued, the ladies of the Volunteer Society of Cheese and other Edible Wonders prepared a table of Wisconsin sharp cheddar, Kansas City barbecue, New Orleans jambalaya, Omaha steaks, Alabama spoon bread, California artichokes, Georgia peaches, Boston clam chowder, Mexican jalapenos, Florida marlin bites, salt from the ancient Dead Sea in Israel, dates from Palestine, white rice and green tea from China, curried rice from India, whole grain pancakes with Vermont maple syrup, Ozark blueberries, Mississippi tomatoes, Japanese sushi, battered Gulf Coast shrimp and Arkansas quail with cranberry sauce from New York State.

All of this was an effort to recognize people's variety of tastes and points-of-view. Aubrey's hometown was not only tolerant, it was respectful.

"You inspired Saint Francis to call all of them his brothers and sisters," Reverend Gordon continued. "We ask you to bless this pet."



Tears streamed from the eyes of grandmothers. Smiles erupted from the faces of children. Men stood by quietly, some with eyes cast to the ground, others to the sky where larks flew in clusters beneath the clouds.

"By the power of your love," Reverend Gordon concluded, holding in his hand a nightcrawler named Gone Fishin' presented by Cliff Drift, an avid fisherman, "enable it to live according to your plan." As some said, "Amen," and others applauded, the feast began with music.

As things wound down, Sophie, Owen and Jozie, Bean's singing dachshunds, mesmerized all attendees, pets and people alike, with an original song created by Bean especially for this occasion. Aubrey's admiration for her back yard neighbor rose another notch as she witnessed the boundless gifts of this weird but gentle young man.

Oh, we are Doxies from Biloxi
Hot dogs happy just because
Four-legged wieners, little hoties
Bunless sausages with sauce

God loves us and his creation
Lots of people love us too
Everywhere in this great nation
In the seas, the skies and zoo

Thanks young masters who feed us
Keep us warm and make us safe
Take us to the vet when they really must
Rub our tummies, kiss our face

Couldn't ask for something better
Than our owner's helping hand
We'll stick by you all forever
Man, oh, man but life is grand

When the song ended, the singers were received with a heartfelt round of audience applause. Reverend Gordon hugged Aubrey's mother, his new wife. Aubrey hugged her neighbor, Bean.

Highlights of the Fall Festival appeared on Channel Nine that evening. Bean joined Aubrey's family for supper, patiently enduring questions from Reverend Gordon.

"Tell me, young man," Reverend Gordon asked. "What are your long-term plans?"

"I'm careful not to plan too far ahead," Bean replied courteously, "since many plans are in the hands of higher powers. But if things work out as I hope they will, I would like

to get married, raise a family and devote my life to pets and songs."

"Not a bad reply," Reverend Gordon said. "Not bad at all."

Aubrey mother, Anne, simply smiled.

Aubrey blushed.

[Visit the Kids' Learning Center here!](#)

It's filled with fun activities for kids about all types of pets.

