

Losing a best friend



*A collection of articles for the bereaved pet owner
who is anticipating or is coping with the death of a pet*



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SPCA

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Dear Friend:

All of us at The San Francisco SPCA know how painful it is to lose a beloved pet. We hope you will accept our sympathy and condolences.

Enclosed is a packet of articles that discusses the death of a pet. These are available for you to read in peace and quiet at a pace that is most comfortable for you. We hope these articles will comfort you and help you cope during your time of grief.

For more information regarding the SF SPCA Pet Loss Support Groups, please call 415.554.3050

Sincerely,



LOSING A BEST FRIEND

By Dr. Betty Carmack

A health care professional for 40 years, Dr. Betty Carmack is a Professor of Nursing at the University of San Francisco. She holds a master's degree in nursing from the University of Pennsylvania, and a doctorate in educational psychology from USF.

The accidental death of one of her animals was a major factor in her decision to start a grief counseling service for pet owners. On the first Tuesday of every month, Dr. Carmack leads a free monthly support group at The San Francisco SPCA on dealing with the grief of losing a pet. She also recently published "Grieving The Death of a Pet", a book on coping with pet loss.

An aching in the pit of the stomach, a sadness that won't go away. An emptiness inside that nothing can fill. No desire to eat, trouble falling asleep. No real interest in going out and doing things, able to find nothing to divert one's mind from the incessant loneliness. These are symptoms of grief, bereavement. They are some of the feelings people describe when they talk about the loss of their pets.

Herbert Nieburg, quoting Colin Murray Parkes, defines grief as "an emotional and behavioral reaction that is set in motion when a love-tie is broken." The reaction is understood and accepted by society in general when a human friend or family member dies. To help people deal with the loss of a loved one, hospitals include on their staffs specially trained nurses, social workers, grief counselors, physicians and psychologists. There are community support groups and self-help organizations available to assist people in moving through the universally recognized grieving process.

But that same acceptance and understanding is rarely offered when someone experiences grief at the loss of a pet. We frequently hear, "I know I shouldn't feel this way. After all, it was only a dog." Or, "Why is she so upset? It was just a cat."

Only a dog? Dr. Aaron Katcher, of the University of Pennsylvania, found that 93% of all pet owners consider their animals as members of their families. Companion animals give us a sense of being needed, of being loved. They are living beings to love and care for, someone to talk to. They sit and listen without passing judgment on what we say. They accept our behavior, the parts of ourselves that other people don't accept – even our most vulnerable and insecure parts. They provide a source of affection, tactile physical contact, something to touch and caress, to nurture. For some, the bond is as profound as a relationship with a child, or a spouse.

When one loses an animal companion – through death due to illness, accident or natural causes, because it's lost or stolen, as division of property after divorce – a significant love-tie has been

broken. Why is it so difficult to understand that losing such an important part of one's life can cause profound grief and bereavement?

I first learned about those feelings after losing my own dog, about five years ago. After speaking with others who experienced similar pain over the loss of their pets, I realized there were no support groups or other resources to help people deal with grief at the loss of an animal companion. Since I began a counseling service for pet owners, I've talked to people in all stages of bereavement – from immediately after the death of their animals, to several years later. The messages they convey are the same. There is a tremendous sense of emptiness. It hurts. And the pain doesn't end easily or quickly.

For a variety of reasons, not everyone develops such a deep emotional attachment to their pet. It's the people who do form those bonds who need help in resolving the overwhelming grief when they lose their companion animals. The teenager whose dog was part of her life for nine years. The childless woman whose cat was her "baby." The single person living alone whose "best friend" and only source of daily companionship just dies. The couple who made the painful decision to euthanize their pet because the animal was suffering from terminal cancer. The 83-year-old man who shared his home with just his dog for the past 19 years. These are the people I see and work with.

Possibly you've known the pain of losing an animal companion. Probably you've had friends who experienced deep grief at the loss of their pet. Perhaps you've wanted to know how to help, how to take some of the pain away. I'd like to share with you some of the things that have worked for me – as a counselor, as a nurse, as a person.

First, a grieving pet owner needs assurance that his or her feelings are normal, reasonable and healthy. Denying the loss, pretending the pain doesn't exist, is to invite bigger problems later. Feelings that aren't acknowledged are pushed down and hidden. They take their toll in physical illness, in misplaced anger, in reduced productivity at work or at home. The loss of a beloved animal companion must be acknowledged if the feelings it engenders are ever to be understood and dealt with.

As you acknowledge its importance, try to help the person understand and talk about the ways in which the loss is felt. "Of course you miss Tawny, he was your friend, your constant companion for seven years." Or, "All your love went into that little dog." Or, "Your beautiful cat was the reason you looked forward to coming home every night." Do it in your own way, using your own words. It will help a grief-stricken pet owner acknowledge those feelings, even if it's just through a nodding of the head, or eyes filling with tears. It is never helpful to avoid talking about the importance the animal had in its owner's life.

Encourage the individual to verbalize the feelings of loss, anger, sadness, emptiness, and loneliness. "You look as if you're really hurting inside. Is that how you're feeling?" Again, you'll find your own words, your own personal way to say it.

I also believe it is important for some people to “say goodbye” to a pet – express in words all the warm, loving feelings an individual had about the animal. How much the dog meant to its owner. How the person’s life was touched by the rabbit. How special the cat was, and in what ways. If the words can be said while the pet is still alive – when the owner first learns of a terminal illness, for example – so much the better. I suggest that the person be left alone with the animal to say the words he or she is feeling. If the pet is no longer alive, I often urge the grieving owner to imagine the animal sitting in its usual spot, to visualize the pet – and to say goodbye.

It is essential that bereaved pet owners be encouraged to carry out the necessary rituals of “letting go.” When people die, there are funerals, viewings and wakes, burials or cremations, the scattering of ashes. There are memorial services to celebrate the lives of the deceased, our “last respects” are paid. My experience suggests that similar rituals can help some people resolve the feelings of losing an animal companion, as well. It’s not for every pet owner, of course. Some don’t attach any value to such gestures, or would just feel foolish; they neither want nor need them. But for others, the rituals have a great deal of meaning, and in those cases, I urge the individual to go ahead and carry them out. I’ve known several people who have held such ceremonies and who are certain they were of major importance in helping them “let their pets go.” It is essential that there be sensitivity to the feelings and needs of each individual, and that each receive full support from understanding friends. Next, try to help the person recall the good times with the pet, the pleasant, loving memories. The remembering, the talking about it openly, assists one in moving through the grief. Everyone goes through the process at a different speed and in a different way. You can help some people begin to work through bereavement on an anticipatory level, when they realize their animal companion is growing old or learn that the pet has a terminal illness. Others are unable to prepare themselves for grief while the animal is still alive; the shock hits them suddenly, even when they knew death was imminent long before it actually happened. Sometimes the loss occurs unexpectedly, through accident or theft. For those people, the process can take much longer.

Be prepared for the painful feelings of sadness and loneliness to recur after the initial grieving period is over. It frequently happens without warning. I know people who felt the old anguish return at income tax time, when they found cancelled checks for veterinary bills. One woman, who had taken an automobile trip with her dog, experienced sudden, painful feelings of loss all over again when she traveled the same route after the death of the animal. Sometimes it happens when one hears about the loss of someone else’s pet. All the unresolved feelings can come flooding back, rising up on the anniversary of the death, a birthday, a family holiday. Know it can happen, and try to understand it when it does.

Some owners have a need to keep and handle a pet’s toys, dishes, collar, scratching post, bed – things that touched the animal in some way. They hold on to these objects, keeping them as treasured mementoes. Others find they need and want to get those reminders out of the house immediately. Some would never consider letting another pet use them; some deliberately give them to other animals, comforted by the feelings of continuity it brings. Frequently, owners are inconsistent, holding onto some of their pet’s belongings, getting rid of others. Accept the behavior, and don’t try to judge it. Each person handles this in that way that feels best.

The answer also varies as to whether a bereaved pet owner should get another animal companion immediately after the loss of the first. Some find that adopting a new pet helps reduce the empty, lonely feelings. Being able to love and be loved by another animal, to nurture and care for another living being – everything that made the bond with the first pet so strong – returns sooner if a new one can be adopted right away. But again, it's not the answer for everyone. Some people find they resent the presence of a new animal, angry at the thought that it is there only because their beloved companion is not. Others feel it would show disrespect to the deceased pet to get another too soon – to “replace it without properly grieving.” My experience suggests that, if those feelings are strong, it is wiser to wait before adopting again. But there is no “proper” period of time for grieving. Loved ones can never really be “replaced,” but another animal can make its own special place on one's heart. Getting a new pet companion can help resolve the pain and ease the grief – but each owner must act according to his or her personal feelings.

As the human/companion animal bond gains increasing attention among professionals and the public, perhaps the community will become more supportive and accepting of the grief experienced when a pet is suddenly gone from someone's life. The loss is very real. And the pain hurts. After all, why wouldn't it, if a person has actually lost a “best friend?”

From “Our Animals” (The San Francisco SPCA) Summer 1983

There Is No Grief Like the Loss of a . . .

By Kate Walsh Slagle

Loss is being left behind without something valuable that you once had. If you invest emotional energy into a person, a pet, a place, an event, or an object, that is loss. Grief is mourning of the lost part of yourself – the time, energy, attention and feelings that you gave to the person, place or object you have lost.

The amount of yourself – your time, your energy, your feelings – that is invested in a particular person, pet, place or thing will determine its value for you. A flash from my life illustrates this: I'm sitting in the school cafeteria, choking down hot coffee. I'm feeling devastated, as if I've lost my best friend. My parrot is dead. He was like a best friend. He kept me company while Rudy was overseas. When I first got him as a Christmas present, he was so wild. It took six months for him to understand that I wouldn't hurt him. I'll never forget the first day he finally trusted me and landed on my shoulder. God, how funny he was when he imitated the alarm clock buzzer! He gave me so many hours of joy and laughter. He loved spaghetti. Now he's gone. I didn't know how much he meant to me until now. I'm trying to tell the people at this table why I'm pale and teary-eyed today. Stan understands. He's not saying a word, but I feel his caring as he strokes my hair. Steve is across the table, looking perplexed. He says, "I can't understand why you're so upset. It was only a pet bird. My heart is sinking. There's no way you can understand.

Since I invest a large part of myself in pets, they become very valuable to me. I loved my parrot; I valued him. He filled a large section in the circle of my life. When he died, a big chunk of that circle was stolen away. My wholeness was broken. I felt a gap, an empty spot in my life. I experienced loss. Steve, whose value system did not include giving parts of himself away to animals, could not understand how I suffered such loss over a pet bird. What was loss to me wasn't loss to him because of the difference in our value systems. So what is loss? Loss is being left behind without something valuable that you once had.

Once loss has interrupted your life, the first thing you need to do is to give yourself permission to react naturally to your loss, permission to grieve.

Giving yourself permission to grieve means letting go of the mask of composure that you usually wear to hide your feelings from yourself and others. Giving yourself permission to grieve means allowing yourself to hurt, to be empty. Giving yourself permission to grieve means listening to the gentle voice inside that whispers the way to heal, rather than listening to the people around you who are telling you to be strong, to stop crying.

The following exercise is a way to begin to allow yourself the permission to explore the feeling of grief.

Opening the channel. Take some time now to turn your attention inward. What are you feeling? Rage? Anger? Hurt? Guilt? How do these feelings manifest themselves (through headaches, nausea, diarrhea, backaches)?

Grief is not limited to losses experienced through death. If you invest emotional energy in a person, a pet, a place, an event, or an object, that is loss.

Grief is a mourning of the lost part of yourself – the time, energy, attention and feelings that you gave to the person, pet, place or object you have lost. Through your mourning, you gradually reclaim that part of you that you had given away, so that later you will have it to give away again, in a new and different direction.

The symptoms of acute grief are bodily distress, a preoccupation with the image of the lost loved one, guilt and anger reactions, and a loss of normal patterns of behavior.

The most common features symbolizing distress in the body are a tendency to sigh, a sense of lost strength, feelings of being drained and exhausted, feelings of emptiness in the pit of the stomach, dryness in the mouth and no desire to eat or the tendency to eat too much.

Preoccupation with the image of the lost loved one shows itself in three ways: Auditory hallucinations in which you may experience hearing the voice of the lost one call out; hypnologic hallucinations in which you may see, as if in a vision, the lost one, and the experience of catching glimpses of the deceased – for instance, on the street, getting on a bus, or in a crowd. The guilt reaction is characterized with derisive feelings of self-accusation and self-reproach for not doing the “right” things for the lost one.

The anger reaction is characterized by loss of sensitivity in relationships with friends and family members, along with feelings of irritability and isolation.

Changes in behavior are restlessness, hyperactivity without a way to channel the energy, an inability to begin and maintain normal daily activity, and a loss of social skills.

Rather than seeing grief as a monster from which you must run and hide, you need to look at it in terms of its being a process of healing. You have to go through it and come out on the other side of it. You have to go through it. You have to pass through the varying phases. Loss leaves an empty space in your life. Grief is the process that allows you to fill in the gap.

The initial stage of grief is typically characterized by numbness, alarm or shock, and begins immediately upon experiencing the loss. Shock tends to serve as a cushion, numbing you for a little while to the full impact of the loss. It gives you some time before you completely begin to absorb the fact or the reality of the loss. This period of numbness gives you a brief rest from feeling. You feel nothing, and everything around you takes on an unreal quality. During shock,

you know about the loss in your head, but in your gut it is still unknown. It's as though you are on automatic, you go through the motions, you attend to what needs to be done – yet at the same time, you feel detached, separate from it, all because you can't grasp it. It just isn't real. Shock is the first step in healing. It is vital to allow the shock or numbness, as uncomfortable as it is, to be.

The shock that you experience from the loss gives a severe blow to your body and emotions. You are injured, deeply hurt. When an animal is wounded it goes off and finds a place that is safe. There it rests, eating little, taking in liquid nourishment itself as a part of the process of healing. So it is, with you. Like an injured animal, you need to find a haven, a safe place where you can pull back and rest; a place where you can begin to take care of your body and your emotions. You need to begin to take care by turning into yourself.

If your way is to be strong and stoic, then be there. If your way is to yell and cry out in protest, then be there. You have to go through the shock and come out at the other end so you can move on in your healing. But while you have to allow it, there are some other ways to soften its impact.

Let the people in your life who care about you know that you need their tenderness. This is the time when you need all the love you can get.

Everything seems magnified at night. Everything about your loss seems bigger. It all seems distorted, out of proportion. You may lie in bed and find your eyes wide open. You may toss and turn, unable to get comfortable, unable to relax, unable to turn off the thoughts that are racing through your mind. Insomnia is usually tied to the mind being wide awake, speeding, chattering, loudly playing thoughts and scenarios that keep your body taut and restless. To overcome insomnia, get up and “put your head to bed.” Put your mind to sleep so that the rest of you can fall into slumber. One way of lulling your mind is to get a pencil and paper and begin jotting down the thoughts in your head. Don't analyze, don't judge, don't censor – merely record. Once the thoughts are put down on paper, they are no longer being carried around in your head, causing a noisy babble. Talking into a tape recorder is another means for getting busy thoughts out of your head. Once you free the thoughts by letting them out, you lighten up inside and quiet down.

Another way of quieting your mind and tucking it away for the night is by lullaby. Mothers have known this trick for centuries. Listen to soft, caressing music that soothes and has the effect of hugging. This allows your mind to rest. The rhythmic motion of a rocking chair also can bring soothing, gentle rest. A cup of warm milk helps to relax the tight muscles that keep you locked into wakefulness.

And lastly, reading until your eyes begin to grow heavy helps to put your mind to sleep. Acknowledge your feelings: “Irritable. I'm angry. I don't like that I've lost.” Say it out loud. Give the feelings a voice. Expressing it will help it begin to disappear.

Some People Who Have Had a Loss by Death Report That Their Lost Loved One Came to Them in a Dream

One Way of Helping

The second stage of grief is called searching/pining. It is at this time that reality gradually makes itself known to you. As the reality of your loss becomes more apparent, you tend to feel overwhelmed. You begin to withdraw, no longer call friends on the phone or meet with them for lunch. Life outside you seems somehow unimportant.

Changing your focus to your inner world as you move through this phase of grief, you might find yourself yearning and calling out for the lost loved one – especially if you lost the person by death.

Whenever you lose something, your impulse is to look for it, to search for it. And so it is, also, with traumatic loss. Particularly with loss due to death, people report feeling an impulse to search out parts of the environment that the lost loved one used to inhabit.

Suicidal thoughts often enter the mind of the grieving person in this searching phase, for suicide, in the case of a death loss, can represent a way of succeeding in the search for the lost person. The lost loved one would be found in a reunion with the grieving person in death. Searching is a means of making the loss real. It is a way of becoming conscious of the fact that the loss really and truly has occurred. For when you search and you don't find, your loss becomes very real. You are then left with dealing with the reality of your loss.

The searching/pining stage of grief has two aspects: That of searching and that of finding. The reality of your loss brings with it severe pain. So you try to find ways to ease your pain. Maintaining a sense of the lost person's presence, a feeling that he or she is close at hand, is one way that you lessen the pain of loss.

Many who have lost a loved one through death experience hypnologic hallucinations, in which the lost one is seen in the form of an apparition or vision. The vision seems to reassure the person that the lost one is all right. This eases the pain of loss.

Another avenue of finding is through dreams. Often, a message of reassurance and importance is carried in a dream. Some people have had a loss by death report that their lost loved one came to them in a dream and reassured them that they were alright.

As the feelings of loss break through, there is searing anguish. You are deeply hurt. Your hurt is so severe that you're not sure you can survive it. Tears fall uncontrollably. Deep sobs wrench at your insides. You are in agony. There seems to be no bottom to it. You feel as if you will never feel any other way again. You never knew you could hurt like this.

One Way of Helping Your Tears to Flow

People around you who care about you often cannot handle your hurt. When they see you hurting, they hurt, so they attempt to shut down your feelings. You must not allow others to shut you down. The main way that others attempt to get you to stop feeling is by invalidating your feelings. When they see your tears, they may try to get you to cheer up. They may tell you jokes to try to make you laugh. They may ask you to look at the bright side of things. In doing this they subtly invalidate your feelings. The message is that your pain is not OK but people who are invalidating you don't realize that by being in your pain you are accepting your loss. You're accepting it by going through it. The person who is invalidating you is having difficulty with your tears. They are uncomfortable with pain. When someone tries to encourage you to look at the bright side, let him or her know where you really are: "I know that you really care about me and are worried. I appreciate that. I'm OK. I just don't feel cheery. I'm hurting and I feel sad." Try to stay away from people who ridicule you. Tenderness and understanding is what you need now. If you can't get away from the ridiculer, make your feelings known: "I'm, feeling really invalidated, and I don't need that now. I'm hurting inside, and I need to be letting that hurt out. So please don't invalidate me!"

When someone tries to explain away your pain, again let him or her know where you are: "I know it's hard for you to see me like this. But I am still feeling the need to grieve, and that's what I'll continue to do until the need is gone."

Accepting your pain means getting into it and letting it flow out of you. This helps to ease it. One way of helping your tears to flow is to create a soft, safe environment in which you can feel secure enough to release the pain. You can make this place within your own home, by yourself or with supportive friends.

Start with a room that is warm, a room that has a rug, pillows of a cozy favorite chair. Take the phone off the hook so no one will disturb you. Dim the lights in the room or light candles. Select some sad, beautiful music and put it on the stereo. Any music that touched a sad note inside will do. Turn the volume up high so that the music fills the room. Feel the music. Take it inside. Feel it caress you. Allow it to touch the pain. Feel the pain moving, as you begin to let go of it. Just let it go. You may want to have a pillow nearby that you can hold onto as you sob and cry. You may feel the need to rock. Do it. Allow whatever comes to just come. You may feel the need to say your thoughts and feelings out loud. Do it. Call out for your loss. Yearn. Feel it. Allow it. Know that you are healing within and release of pain. Feel the healing. Weep. Mourn, for you have lost.

If you can't create your own safe environment, then go to one that already exists. Find a group that deals with grief, a support group, where you can let it out. Grief groups are springing up in most towns. Your local mental health center, hospital or suicide prevention line can refer you to such a group. If there aren't any where you live, then start one. I know three women who all became widows within a few years of each other. They all lived on the same block and they got together and formed their own widow's group. They nurtured each other and shared the grief together.

Another way to help facilitate your pain and tears is to write in a journal. A journal can be like a best friend – something you can confide in, a means of sharing yourself without fear of being judged or discounted. And within that process, you can begin to sort them out. In this way, keeping a journal can provide you with a sense of perspective. Rereading earlier entries also gives perspective. You can see change. Seeing change will help you to stay with your pain on your way through it.

Many times I'll find myself crying as I write in my journal. In the writing, I've bumped up against some pain. The writing about it allows it to flow. Keeping a journal opens you up to yourself.

The Third Stage of Grief Is Depression

Depression grapples with the permanence of your loss. It is here that you come to know that who or what you've lost is never coming back, that things will never be as they were before. What you have lost is gone forever. The way your life was is gone forever. With the dawning of the awareness, depression embraces you. Anger and guilt are the two most prominent emotions experienced in this stage. The anger is not so continuous but seem to roll over you in waves. It is on and off. In a loss that is the result of death, the anger is often felt as bitterness toward the loved one that has died and left the survivor behind.

Guilt feelings often follow anger. You feel guilty because you have been angry. Guilt is really anger turned on you.

Depression is about two things: Dealing with the permanence of the loss, and letting go. It is in the depths of this depression, wrestling in anguish with the despair and defeat that you finally let it go. It is here that you allow your loss to be truly what it is – loss, simple and clear – gone, never to return. It is a time of separation, a trying time, as you sever yourself from your loss. Once you've finished with your loss and set yourself free, you shift into the final stage of your journey through grief. This is called restructuring. It is now that you begin the task of rebuilding your world, picking up the pieces that were shattered by the loss.

If the previous stages have been worked through, then healing is nearly complete. It's not that you forget your loss, or that you wipe it totally out of your consciousness. You will think about your loss from time to time. But it will be remembered with warm and tender feelings, rather than with searing pain, explosive anger or anguish and despair. As you reconstruct your world, you begin to feel a sense of balance, wholeness. You feel proud of your growth and excited. You feel new.

**From the book LIVE WITH LOSS by Kate Walsh
Stagle 1982 by Prentice-Hall, Inc. Published by
Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632**

**Personal essays by pet owners
who have experienced the death of
a special friend...**

Ever So Humble

LINDA WELTNER

Writing the final chapter of a 13-year love story

The house is empty this morning. I miss the dog. Over and over again. I return to my car, expecting to find him waiting in the back seat. I grope my way to the bathroom at night, trying not to trip on his sleeping body. I open our back door, picturing him there on the couch by the window. I listen for the scratch at the screen door, the sound of his body moving on the stairs, the jangle of his licenses. I reach for the leftover hamburger on my mother-in-law's plate, thinking, "Oooh Buck will love..."

And then I remember.

He's dead.

We knew, when we took him to the veterinarian last Tuesday evening, that he was never coming home. He was incontinent by then, and so weak from a disease called autoimmune hemolytic that for the first time in his life he failed to make it to our bedroom at night. We carried him onto the lawn Tuesday morning, and all day long he lay in the soft shaded grass as if in a trance. When I came to lie beside him in the afternoon, his tail stirred only faintly, but his eyes opened wide to gaze into mine. I buried my head in Buck's chest and breathed in his scent, a smell, I suppose, that only a mother could love.

Time stood still then, or at least I thought it did. The purple irises froze on their stems, and the lilies stood motionless, a soft pink blur against the fence. The sun, aloft in a sky of unchanging blue, held its breath as the world went silent, except for the harsh exhalation of the dog's labored breath and the beating of his heart against my ear. Buck moved only once, stretching his head away from mine. I rubbed his neck, straining to hear his barely audible response, a soft vibrating sound deep in his throat.

"If only..." I thought, then stopped myself. With a pet you've loved unconditionally, there's nothing to do or undo that can make any difference at all.

Why do we play that same game with human beings, trying to convince ourselves that if only we'd done something differently, we could have avoided the pain of losing someone we love? Human relationships, with all their complexities, lend themselves to regret and self-blame, but knowing that my love for Buck was constant and unconditional, I could see how little there is to be gained by wishful thinking. No guilty bargain can change the absolute reality of loss.

Make up with a parent before she dies. There will still be no one at the other end of the line when you reach for the phone one Sunday afternoon. Never lose your temper or choose housework over hugging your child, and the seat beside you will still be empty when his favorite TV program comes on. All the kisses one might have given will never fill the void created by a death in the family.

In intimate relationships we reshape ourselves over time to accommodate an interest here, a passion there, stretching, twisting and changing until we fit together like the pieces of a puzzle. Then, at a loss, we discover our own incompleteness, see how clearly our sense of our self relied upon another's presence. How were we to know that our enjoyment of walking sprang from the pleasure of companionship, or that our interest in our partner's excitement?

Alone, we cannot help but notice the empty places that once were filled, the unaccustomed silences, and the familiar activities that have no meaning once love is no longer the justification. I slipped my arm around Buck's body, closing my eyes, willing this moment to last forever.

"Time to go," my husband said.

"It can't be." I glanced at my watch, thinking how cruelly the hours pass, sending us all slipping down the steep slope of our mortality. I learned at that moment, in the peacefulness of a warm summer afternoon, that there is never a pause in our long journey toward death.

We carried Buck into the car. The veterinarian took a blood sample, and we settled in to await the result of the lab tests. I sat on the floor, Buck's head on my lap.

"The hematocrit is 11," Dr. Harrington said when she returned five minutes later. A death sentence.

"Are you alright with this?" she asked gently.

"He's so weak, he doesn't mind this at all," she murmured, shaving the dog's foreleg. He lay, warm and relaxed, in my arms. I stroked the familiar fur for the last time, knowing that this was the moment my husband and I became worthy of the absolute trust he placed in us.

"No more suffering," I whispered as the needle slid in to the vein. In seconds, the dog shuttered, a single long deep sigh as the soul that lived within him disappeared like the flame of a candle in the wind. The vet listened for a heartbeat. It's all over," she said. "Stay here as long as you like." That night we entered our house without the dog beside us for the first time in 13 years.

This is how all love stories really end. A life begins, experiences and departs, leaving no clues to its source or final destination. It reveals to the survivors: This is the natural rhythm of all life. Acknowledge the gift. Be grateful for the mystery. Surrender to what is and must be. Believe in happily ever after.

*Linda Weltner is a free-lance writer.
Her column appears each week in At
Home.*

From "The Boston Globe" June 1992

TRUDY AND ME — A LOVE STORY

By Margie

Trudy came into my life one warm July evening - - a gift from a friend. Our meeting was memorable. Arriving home late that night, my mind was still on problems at work, when suddenly I was jolted to the present and stopped in mid-stride. Two huge, brown paws swung up to rest on my shoulders - - a quivering, long, wet nose was pressed against mine, warm brown eyes fixing my own in friendly greeting.

This was Trudy - - a 4-year old, sleekly beautiful, 80-pound German Shorthaired Pointer, who in days to come was to completely capture my heart - - and although I didn't know it at the time, life would never again be quite the same.

Trudy, I had been told, was an "outdoor-dog", and had been kept by her former owner in a spacious "run", and rarely if ever, allowed in the house. (This seemed ideal, since I already had one dog, a medium-sized German Shepherd named "Pepper", who had the run-of-the-house). While it may have been true that Trudy was formerly kept outdoors, it soon became apparent that this situation had NOT been at all to her liking - - (and Trudy, I was soon to learn, definitely had a mind of her own!).

She immediately expressed her absolute rejection of the idea that she should stay in the backyard by launching an all-out attack on the back door (which was already in a state of disrepair). And within a few days, while I was away at work, Trudy had managed to reduce the door to mere hanging strips of wood - - as if to make it perfectly clear that she did NOT wish to stay on the outside of this new owner's home. It worked. --Trudy was "in". From there it took only one week of nightly scratching on the outside of my bedroom door to convince me that Trudy really should not be made of sleep in the hall. And once she had worked her way into my bedroom, it was a cinch for her to select a sleeping place right up on my bed - by this time uncontested, I might add - (except by "Pepper", who was forced to move over a bit.) As if to make her rather large frame as inconspicuous as possible, Trudy obligingly curled herself into an apologetic, small-as-possible ball-shape, and peacefully snored. Yes, Trudy also **SNORED!** - a trait I had always found difficult to accept, even in human companions.

This took some getting used to, but in months to come the sound of her gentle snoring signaled that all was right with the world, and it was OK to "drop-out" for awhile, unafraid, for a peaceful night's sleep.

The non-dog owner might well ask why I did not immediately get rid of Trudy. I have wondered also - probably because I was just as Stubborn as Trudy, and unaccustomed to defeat in such matters. The training had to continue, that much was clear. What was not so clear was just who

was being trained – Trudy or me! It turned out that Trudy had many more things to teach me -- beautiful, comical, endearing things that would make her a part of my heart forever.

To watch Trudy in the field was to witness perfection. For this she was bred. And although not formally trained to the hunt, her natural instincts led her to swing purposefully along with a fluent grace, skimming over the field, nose to the ground - - seemingly pulled along by her exquisitely sensitive nose. Here she was all business, unable to be distracted by any amount of whistling or calling.

It was a good thing that I didn't have plans for hunting with her, however, because although classed as a "gun-dog", Trudy was deathly afraid of loud noises! (Whether this was an innate fear, or the result of someone's clumsy early training for the hunt, I never knew for sure.) Whatever the root cause, I soon learned that thunder, and 4th of July firecrackers, would send her into paroxysms of trembling for hours. At these times Trudy would dive to my side, no matter where I was sitting, and lean her 80-pound, shivering frame against me, ducking her head under my chin and there she would stay until all danger was past.

Trudy was a paradox somehow able to be regally beautiful and comical all at once. She seemed to think that people are to sit on for whenever I was settled in one place, such as watching TV in the double chaise lounge, she would jump up beside me, and then sit right on my lap, her tall frame effectively obscuring the screen and everything else, for that matter. Even after I wriggled out from under, she persisted. Not content to just curl up alongside, she would the plop her 80 pounds down across my lap, and "capture" me, rendering me completely immobile and there she would fall asleep. I had read that German Shorthaired Pointers are noted as being the "biggest snugglers" of all breeds in existence. It was certainly true of Trudy.

She seemed not to sense where she began and others left off and was content only when there was no intervening space between. Before long she had me actually believing that such behavior was normal (perhaps not for other breeds, but then, of course, SHE was a German Shorthair!) What a contrast was Trudy at rest, with Trudy in motion. Being by nature high-strung, she had only 2 gears – full speed ahead, or total Collapse. There seemed to be nothing in-between.

Trudy was in a hurry to live. When not at rest, she was aquiver with the restless anticipation of doing "something wonderful" like going for a walk (in her case, a gallop!), a ride in the car, traipsing down the beach with her new-found friend, Pepper; or hunting skunks, with which the thicketed terrain surrounding my beach house was well-populated. (Over-populated, if you ask me, but the odds seemed to be greatly to Trudy's liking).

But less heady adventures were also things to be exuberant about such as eating, or even drinking out of her water bucket. Trudy's body was eloquently expressive of her emotions. But in case there were any doubts, all of her feelings seemed epitomized in her short, ever-wagging tail. A never to be forgotten mind image is that of Trudy fervently wagging her tail at something so seemingly unimportant as drinking her water. She seemed to be saying that nothing in this life is unimportant; that all of it must be savored to the fullest.

Trudy was right. It turned out that we were to have far too little time together. Quite suddenly, at age 8, with no advance warning signals, Trudy stopped eating. After a long, agonizing month of trips to the Vet, examinations, medication schedules, and alarmingly rapid weight loss, only one avenue remained: exploratory surgery. The day before the scheduled exploratory, I arranged with the Pet Clinic to allow me to spend some time with Trudy realizing that it might be our last moments together. For one whole hour we had the exclusive use of one of the examining rooms. I sat right down on the floor, and Trudy came over and sat on my lap. I held her sleek, precious body close; and buried my face in her silky fur, trying to think only of our wonderful 4 years together. Only once did she leave my lap, to go over and nudge the door with a slight whine, as if to say "Come on, let's go home". For an hour I stroked her and talked to her. How I longed to make her understand how much she meant to me how much joy she had brought into my life. When our hour was up, I kissed Trudy's nose, and told her no matter what happened, I would always remember this precious hour together, would always love her with all my heart.

The call came the next day from the Doctor. The exploratory surgery had confirmed my deepest fears; Trudy had inoperable stomach cancer. She could not be saved.

Trudy is gone now, and the painful shock of separation cuts deep. I think I always knew that life would never be the same without Trudy comical, beautiful, lovable Trudy. Some unexplainable inner sense still expects to see her loping up from the beach, still sees the love and trust in her liquid-brown eyes, still feels her silky warmth curled up beside me.

And I still see Trudy wagging her tail at the world, loving life with all her heart. And slowly over the months to follow, my mind grasped the deeper truth that nothing we have experienced, nothing that can be held in memory, is ever lost. Trudy is a part of me forever. And although there is deep sadness that Trudy is gone from my life, there is also joy that I knew her, a sense of awe that we could share such a bond and a deep awareness that in some indescribable way, I am forever changed.

Action Research Report on Handling the Death of a Pet

Our readers share their very personal feelings on this serious subject.

By Linda W. Lewis

When my feelings are so intense that no other outlet will suffice, I find it helps to write them down. I've spent a lot of time writing about my cat Jenny. Jenny died because she had a bad cold and didn't have enough strength to fight it off. I guess I feel guilty – I should have done this and that. It's always easier looking back. I miss her but find solace in the fact that she didn't suffer. I didn't have to watch her hurt. I also didn't have to give the word and have her destroyed. What a burden that would have been.

"We buried her in a special box with one of my husband Frank's old T-shirts that she loved and tucked a piece of lace from my wedding in her paw (she dies exactly one month after our wedding day). Just as I was covering her with velvet and closing the box, Frank appeared with one of her favorite toys. I have never been so touched by such a simple gesture. I hadn't been crying, but I started then. We cried together. Even in death Jenny brought us a little closer.

"I put the toy in the box and we picked up Jenny and a shovel and wandered down the street into the woods. I wanted her to go back to the woods. She was born there and I knew she liked it. When the grave was dug, I opened the box one more time to say good-bye. She looked as she always did – happy and content.

"I don't want to hurt anymore. I want to feel good to have experienced her. I opened my heart so wide to her, and now there's this big chunk missing. I guess if I really looked hard, though, I'd see that my heart is in tact, suffering only some growing pains because I loved something so much. How lucky I am to have given and received such devotion.

"I will predict that you will receive many letters such as mine – filled with attachments, brimming with feelings. Be assured your reading time will be well spent for these letters are filled with sentiments straight from the heart. What a wonderful time I've had talking about Jenny and looking for a picture to send. Thank you so very much for the opportunity to do something useful with all these emotions."

Melinda Massaro's prediction was perfectly correct. We received more than 2,000 responses to our Action Research Survey on Handling the Death of a Pet. Each one, like Melinda's, was special in some way because each showed beyond any doubt the true devotion that exists between pets and their owners. Reading your responses was indeed time well spent, but writing this report was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Your letters were all filled with such honest emotions, such heartfelt love, that I hated excluding any of them. I can only hope that the letters I can share will convey the wonderful feelings you all expressed so well. I'm sure that

your comments will be a tremendous comfort to anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one. It's so important at that time to know we are not alone, that the emotions we feel have been experienced by thousands who have known the joy and pain of loving and losing a special pet.

Feeling the Loss

"It's so hard to explain my feelings about Taffy's death. Even now, three years later, the old feelings of hurt and despair still well up inside me. I loved him for 12 years. He saw me through my wedding, the births of my four children and four moves to different homes. Countless times I buried my face in his soft, red fur to cry. It came as quite a shock when one morning he just didn't have the strength to move.

"The doctor diagnosed feline leukemia and peritonitis and recommended euthanasia. He left me alone to think it over. When I called his name and he didn't even have the strength to lift his ear, I knew there was no choice. I watched the needle enter his leg and do its job. I watched his body shake and finally grow still – then I cried. The vet was understanding and stayed with me for a long time, but no one could convince me that I had done the right thing. No one could understand the anger, hurt and despair I was feeling. Even now I cry as I write this and hope you will understand.

Most of our readers will have no trouble at all understanding Rose Marie Kestler's reaction to Taffy's death. Nearly 75 percent of our survey respondents were deeply distraught over the deaths of their own pets, and such deep feelings of distress and guilt were especially common among pet owners who were forced to make the decision to euthanize their pets.

Another reader who lost her companion of 12 years wrote: "Osan had been sick for a year and the vet could not determine what was wrong. I think you always feel guilty when you have a pet euthanized, wondering if you have waited long enough."

Yet, for many there's a feeling of relief – a peace that comes from knowing that the animal no longer suffers and that they've made the right decision for the pet, no matter how hard it was for them.

Guilt and anger are even more common adjuncts of grief when an owner loses an animal because of a preventable accident. Ruth Cummings lost two cats, Fritz and Roxie, to automobile accidents. She wrote: "I'll always carry guilt feelings about their deaths. I know better than to allow cats outside without supervision."

A third of our respondents had to make the decision to euthanize their pets because of disease or injury; 30 percent watched their pets die of natural causes; 24 percent lost their pets in accidents; 7 percent were never able to determine why their pets died; 2 percent put their cats to sleep because of behavioral problems; and 4 percent experienced the trauma of having their cats maliciously killed.

The feelings of anger, sometimes coupled with guilt, are especially strong in the last group. Kelly Donovan watched as a motorist deliberately ran over her cat Felix. It was Friday the 13th

and Felix was a black cat. Felix was a homebody who rarely ventured into the street, but on this occasion a dog was chasing him.

“The grief I felt over his death,” wrote Kelly, “was far greater than I ever expected. I felt such a helpless anger knowing he didn’t have to die – that some sick-minded person felt it necessary to deny my four-year-old her favorite pet and me my companion of nine years. May God forgive him because I don’t know if I ever can.”

This kind of death is especially hard to explain to a child. Another reader wrote: “I had a really hard time trying to help my daughter understand why anyone would kill our cat because I can’t really understand why myself.”

Explaining any kind of death to a child is no easy task. Perhaps that’s why some people tend to avoid the issue. They try to keep the actual circumstances from the child – often with disastrous and lasting consequences. One young reader wrote: “While I was away at school, my cat became ill and my parents had her put to sleep. I was not told about this until several months later when I was visiting. Because of this cruel incident, I was unable for years to recover from the loss of my childhood best friend. I hope your magazine will help others deal with this issue more humanely.”

Grief manifests itself in other ways, too. When Mr. and Mrs. Thomas M. Cornish lost Misty because of an intestinal disease, their grief was overwhelming, bearable only because they could share it with one another.

My husband I left the vet’s office and cried all the way home. Tom’s reaction was surprising to home. ‘If someone had told me several years ago’. He said, ‘that I would cry over the death of a cat, I would have called him a liar’. More surprising, perhaps, was that for about two weeks straight, we could see her (or thought we could see her) running through the apartment, playing as she always had. It was a very weird feeling.”

The Cornish’s were not the only respondents to mention the phenomenon. Mr. and Mrs. Robert Arbige had a similar experience: “For several months after Cat died, we could hear him (or thought we heard him) in the house, or we would see his shadow going around a corner or under a favorite chair. We would momentarily wonder where he was and why he did not greet us when we came home from work. I would be doing my normal daily chores and would start crying because something would bring back a memory. My husband couldn’t take his nap after work because Cat always took one with him. It took a lot of adjusting on both our parts to accept the fact that he was gone. Cat was a special friend for 16 years and after four years we still miss him.”

The Final Arrangements

“When I lost Bitty to pneumonia, she was a little over five years old. I buried her at a pet cemetery. I did this for myself, to ease the pain, more than for any other reason. I bought a headstone because that was the last thing I could give her and I wanted to demonstrate my

feelings. It was expensive, but I would have spent many times more to have kept her alive and never have regretted it.”

Mary Filer is among the small, but growing number of pet owners who choose burial at a pet cemetery. Only 5 percent of our respondents made this final tribute. Most pet owners either leave their pets with the veterinarian for disposal or bring them home and bury them on their own property. Those who must have their pet euthanized are more likely to leave them with the vet. If the pet dies at home, backyard burial is the most common practice. A few who cannot afford a pet cemetery and have no property of their own, make arrangements with friends who do or have no alternative but to put the body in the garbage can for collection.

About 40 percent of our readers made some special final tribute to their pets: 30 percent provided a casket for burial; 25 percent offered a memorial; and another 40 percent chose other ways of honoring their pets. The most common of these tributes was a donation to a humane society. Some shelters put the cat’s name on a special memorial plaque for a small donation. In honor of KC, Terry Berkowsky planted an olive tree; others also planted flowers and trees. Some owners wrote poems, made albums, lit candles and offered prayers for their special pets. One reader shared this special quote from Margaret Wise Brown that she used when her cat was buried: “Dear Father, hear and bless thy beasts and singing birds, and guard with tenderness small things that have no words.”

Beginning Again

“Get another cat right away,” is the advice bereaved pet owners hear most often. For some, this advice works well, but not for all.

The day we buried Guy at the pet cemetery,” wrote Rosalie Liberto, “I was so brokenhearted I didn’t think I could stand to see another cat, but my husband knew I wouldn’t be able to resist. He took me straight from the cemetery to the Bide-a-Wee shelter, ‘just to look’ he said over my protests. Well, we walked out with two female tabbys, Angel and Guyetta. Angel and Guyetta didn’t make me forget my grief – I was deeply depressed over Guy’s loss for some time – but they helped. While I was caring for and loving them, I didn’t have time to think about myself.

Mrs. Thomas Cornish, on the other hand, needed several months to accept another cat.

“Shortly after Misty died, some friends had some kittens and we went over to see them. All I could do was cry; it was just too soon. Misty died in June, and in October we went to our first cat show. There we both fell in love with a beautiful Balinese kitten. It took hours of discussion before we made up our minds to take her home, but now we can both truthfully say that buying our Ka-Lee was the best thing we could have done to sooth the hurt that Misty’s death had brought us.”

About half of our respondents got another pet within a few months; 32 percent already had other pets; and about 18 percent waited a year or more. Many of our respondents didn’t consciously go out looking for another pet; many times the new pet found them. Carol Robinson wrote: “We hadn’t decided to get another cat. We didn’t want to raise a kitten again and our grief was too intense, but about three weeks after Kitty’s death we began seeing this half-grown white stray in the neighborhood. We started trying to feed it, but it was very wary of people. Finally it let us

pet it and we discovered that she was very pregnant. Soon after that, we had a Siamese mother and six non-Siamese kittens. Sheba knew we needed her and found her home.”

Wendy Ford thinks getting another cat is very important: “Some people feel that once their cats die, they could never replace them and they don’t want to go through another emotional attachment, knowing that someday that pet, too, will die. I strongly feel that my cats give me so much love and happiness in their lifetimes that I am obligated to pass that love on to other cats. There are so many that desperately need homes!”

Most cat owners are finally able to accept the deaths of their pets. It seems that one of the hardest parts of the experience is finding someone who can understand and talk with you about your feelings. Most readers report that their friends and relatives just don’t understand their grief, and having someone to talk to is so important. For many this survey was a welcome outlet. Georgia Mendoo wrote: I know this took a long time to tell. I do get carried away when I explain things. I even cried reliving Stinky’s and Laddie’s deaths. It’s still painful after all this time. Thank for listening to me.”

Thank you, Georgia, and all of you, for sharing.

From “Cat Fancy” November 1981

No Way To Say Good-bye

When your best friend dies, how do you say good-bye?

By Carol Benjamin

One moment you're a have. An absent heartbeat later, you're a have not. For the rest of your life, or so it may seem, you replay moments on your internal screen. You reassure yourself by remembering good moments. You think about the first time you took him down to the river and the way he got "plugged in" when he saw his first duck. You recall those long walks right after the first snow, winter after winter. You can still see his face the way it looked when you brought the bitch puppy home, as much for him as for you. You think about running together, pacing each other, protecting each other, and doing shows at schools and making children laugh, about doing shows at nursing homes and crying all the way home. You can even feel the warmth of that broad head in your hand, as if he had come to say good night just one last time.

You make yourself miserable, too, by remembering failures – always yours, never his. You should have taken him out more, for longer walks. You should have played more games. You should have taken him swimming more often. Maybe you shouldn't have gotten another dog. Even though he seemed delighted, maybe he was jealous and too big of heart to show it. And worst of all, you should have been there, your cheek resting on his paw, you should have been there when he died. You should have thanked him for all he gave you. You should have said good-bye.

From "Purebred Dogs: American Kennels Gazette" March 1983

A FINAL TRIBUTE TO MY BEST FISHING FRIEND

By Larry Green

By nature I am pretty much a happy go lucky sort of fellow who asks more out of life than just wetting a fishing line now and then with my best friend. Recently, though, I have been aware of how precious companionship is among close friends and how unsuspecting grief can sneak up behind you and strike with terrible coldness.

I am grief stricken now over the sudden loss of my closest friend and fishing companion for the last 13½ years, who was suddenly taken from me the other day by cancer, a word you quickly learn to hate. I'm talking, of course, about man's best friend, my dog Widgeon, a beautiful Springer Spaniel who had shared a very special close bond with me for nearly 14 years. Now with Widgeon suddenly gone, I am left with an unbearable hole of emptiness big enough you could drive a truck through. For years close friends had told me – warned me – that I was too close to my dog and that some day I would suffer a great loss. How ever right they were. But you cannot share 24 hours of a day, everyday of the year for 14 years of great fun and not grow terribly attached.

Widgeon and I shared everything, both at home and in the field – black tasteless coffee from a thermos in our boat, pork and beans heated over an open campfire, a torn old sleeping bag, and just the sheer joy of fishing, hunting and funning on a thousand or more great adventures and outings the Widgeon and I made together over so many years. This wonderful old dog served as a great inspiration for me and contributed in his own way to so many of my hunting and fishing columns, magazine articles and especially my KCBS Fisherman's Forecast radio shows over the last 11 years. I guess you would say, as pals, we were inseparable.

It is true that our entire family spoiled Widgeon terribly with love, warmth and affection, which so contributed; I believe, to his kind, gentle nature. As Springers go as a breed, he was of remarkable pedigree, extremely intelligent, proud, noble, and in his younger years handsome enough to become a national celebrity in his own right. Widgeon's photo portraits depicting him in a sporting light accompanied many of my outdoor articles and graced the page of more than a dozen national outdoor publications, including cover shots, books and even national television. That handsome Springer who shared the yellow rowboat with actor William Conrad in the closing credits shot for the television series "Outdoor Life" was Widgeon, camera ham that he was. Before that he starred in several TV episodes of the series "Western Outdoorsman" that I hosted.

With his special tail-wagging warmth, Widgeon touched the lives of many. He had a loving character, the kind we look for in people. The flowers, cards and sentiments that poured into us after his death were testaments to his gentle nature by those who will not forget Widgeon.

Thankfully, I was there to hold his head in my lap when Widgeon closed his tired old eyes for the last time, and he is again with me now, but somehow an 8-inch square box of ashes hardly fills the terrible void he left behind. These days I am hunting and fishing alone without my pal, and I am learning just how empty and how lonely a campfire, a duck blind, an unfilled boat seat, or an old dog hair-littered sleeping bag can be. God, how terribly I now miss that old soldier, and thus dedicate this column to him as a small token of deep appreciation for all the wonderful years we spent together as pals in the outdoors.

Goodbye old friend, and may you continue to walk with me, if not in body, perhaps in spirit. I miss you pal:

*Widgeon-Flight of Wing June 17,
1970 to November 28, 1983*

From CWA magazine 1986

In Memory of Barrister

By Shirley E. Richards

I lost my friend last summer. He was short and heavyset with a stern visage of judicial wisdom. And he was English. That's why we called him the Barrister, or Bear for short. A Bulldog, he was a warm wiggly bundle of love who was always ready to dispense wet, sloppy kisses on the objects of his affection.

One evening in June, I went outside for a few minutes, and when I came back, Barrister was lying on his stomach in the living room in his favorite sleeping position. But he wasn't asleep. His tongue was blue and he was no longer breathing. Dr. Newlin, our veterinarian, said it was a heart attack. It was a fast end to a very short life (seven years). That great heart so full of love just stopped.

The bond Barrister and I shared was much like any close human relationship. We loved one another, teased one another and irritated one another at times.

He definitely had a mind of his own. In obedience class we had to get out of the training circle one evening because Bear was not following instructions but was "doing his own thing", which, for the most part, was rolling over on his back so the instructor would pay attention to him. I was embarrassed, but the instructor said, "A Bulldog will only do what a Bulldog wants to do." An independent and hardheaded little rascal he was, but he finally gave in and learned the obedience commands. He learned them, but he didn't always obey them. However, praise usually worked with him because he loved people and wanted to please them.

He enjoyed going to Dr. Newlin's office because he got plenty of affection there, including his favorite form – a vigorous stomach rub. But he didn't like the cold, slick exam table and, after a couple of sessions on it, flatly refused to stay there, and would flatten out comfortably on the floor. Dr. Newlin had to sit on the new, movable high-tech table, which he lowered to the floor so he could minister to Bear. A compromise between man and recalcitrant beast.

My son Mark went with me to buy Barrister when he was 6 weeks old. As Mark and I were leaving the house, my husband Jim said, "Get a dog with spunk." We did. He was a chunk of a dog, hidden under many folds of red brindle, and the breeder called him "Wild Willy" because he was so noisy and full of energy.

He grew fast, and he grew funny. What entertainment that dog was! A unique Bulldog, he stalked rabbits in our back yard. My other son, Jeff, and I looked out the back door one afternoon and doubled over with laughter. Barrister was sliding along the grass with the front part of his body on the ground and his rear end up in the air, ears pinned back against his head. He was creeping slowly and carefully toward his prey, a rabbit sitting against the fence. When

he reached what he obviously considered a suitable distance, he raced toward the bunny, which escaped with ease. “He thinks he’s a hunting dog!” Jeff said.

Bear not only thought he was a hunting dog, he also seemed to think he was a lap dog – all 55 pounds of him. Luckily for me, he preferred my husband’s lap. As soon as Jim sat in his wing chair in the family room, Bear would leap gracefully into his lap, negating the fact that Bulldogs aren’t really built for graceful movement.

Jim wears full leg braces, and it was difficult for Bear to balance all that weight on the bulky braces. But undeterred, he balanced there, with his tongue hanging out and a look of contentment on his face, for at least half an hour every evening. He was never enticed by my considerably softer lap. He knew where he wanted to be.

Barrister also had Lassie tendencies. Once, Jim fell out the back door and hurt his leg. No one saw or heard it happen except Bear. He barked frantically until someone finally came to help. Straight out of a Walt Disney movie.

And there is yet another story about Jim and Bear. Because Jim and I spend a lot of time at our desks and computers in our small home office, that is where Barrister loved to be. Our office became his room of preference, and when we had to leave the house, I would say, “Time to go to the office,” and he would trot down the hall and into the room. On returning home, the first thing I did was to let him out, and no matter how long it had been and how much he surely needed to go out, he wouldn’t go until Jim came in the front door and was properly greeted. Bear would wiggle in joy to see him and roll over on his back to Jim could rub his stomach with his crutch.

The strangest thing that Bear did also involved Jim. Whenever Jim came into a room – any room in the house – Barrister would get up and leave until Jim was seated, and then he would return. He didn’t run from the room in fear. He left calmly and quietly, with dignity.

It seemed to be an act of consideration for a man who walks with crutches. Certainly he had no fear of Jim’s “sticks.” Maybe he thought that Jim needed the extra room to get seated. Who knows what went on in that little mind? The unusual thing is that he *always* did this. None of us ever remembers seeing him stay in a room when Jim came in. Yet he always came back immediately after Jim was seated.

On the last day of his life, Barrister spent the afternoon in the office while Jim and I went to a wedding. He was glad to see us, as usual, when we returned, and bounced around the house full of energy. When I came up the basement steps from the laundry room, he was wiggling at the top, and I stopped to “give him five.” I had just recently taught him that game. I would hold out my hand, palm up, and he would slap his paw in it. What a guy. I miss him so much.

Losing a Friend

By Marie Gould

Last month my old college roommate and best friend for 16 years died. We met a few days after I moved into my first apartment and we were inseparable through college, my first job and all my adult trials and tribulations. He was my dog and half of my family.

It could take a long time to fully recover from this loss. Researchers on the subject say that, for many people, the experience can be compared to the death of a human family member. Initially the pain is acute, but the sadness lingers. Months after the death unexpected tears can fall from the owner's eye after spotting the animal's favorite edible treat in the grocery, or when a tuft of the familiar fur is found in the corner behind the sofa.

But the hardest part of the ordeal may be the reaction of friends and colleagues. Sadly, too few people realize that the death of an animal can devastate the devoted owner.

In my own experience, I was fortunate to be surrounded by animal lovers who understood and were appropriate and caring in their expression of sympathy. I also happen to work for one of the few places that would allow a grieving pet owner the time to recuperate.

In spite of this, I encountered people and heard remarks that I would rather have avoided during the first few days after my pet died. I also spoke to pet owners in the same position who expressed frustration and disappointment at the reactions of friends and relatives.

When dealing with someone who is saddened by the loss of a pet it should not matter what you think of cats and dogs or where you think they stand in the hierarchy of living things. What matters is that the owner had suffered a deep loss that should be acknowledged by others.

We routinely send sympathy cards when someone who loses a relative. Why not when a pet dies? It's easy, inexpensive and it comforts the owner.

Comments like “He had a good, long life” don't help. The pet's long life only gave the owner more time to become attached and collect memories.

“It wasn't a surprise, you expected it” also hurts. Expecting the loss does not lessen it. Many owners do not anticipate the depth of sorrow that they will feel. Remember, too, that the sadness of the owner who spent a lot of energy, time and money trying to save a sick animal may be compounded by the frustration of the futile effort.

“The pet is better off now” is what many people tell the owner who loses an animal after a prolonged and painful illness. The owner already knows that and may even have chosen

euthanasia to stop the suffering. That knowledge does not fill the void that the pet has left behind and is of little comfort in the loneliness that follows the death.

The hardest people to take are the ones who in one way or another communicate that “It was just an animal.” Even these people must have, at some time, suffered a heart- felt loss. They could draw upon their own experience to find words of sympathy for the grieving pet owner.

After my dog died, several people asked me if they should offer their condolences. The answer should be obvious – condolences are in order for the bereaved.

Comforting words like “He was a special pet – I’m sorry that you lost him.” And “I know that you will miss him” will help. If it is true, tell the person that you know how they feel. It won’t require much effort. And, while it may not decrease the feeling of loss, it will, somehow, make the owner feel a lot better.

Coping With Sorrow

Readers share their experiences and advice on
How to deal with the death of a beloved pet.

By Moira Anderson

When I prepared the “Dealing With Death” questionnaire for the June issue, it was with far more than “scientific” curiosity. The topic had been planned for many months, but I wrote it fresh from the death of my own cat. I wanted to learn how others had dealt with the tragedy, to hear the advice that would have special meaning to me – and to anyone who has ever lost a pet. As your answers poured in, I was moved to tears many times. The response was phenomenal – more than 550 completed questionnaires were received, nearly half including detailed letters rich with advice and understanding. Nearly a quarter of these respondents, like me, had lost a pet recently – some within days of having received the June issue. The advice in this report is yours; the report itself is dedicated to all those beloved pets.

The Hardest Decision

Half our respondents had been forced to make the decision to put their pets to sleep. Thus readers had a lot to say about euthanasia: When they believed it was necessary and how they coped with this painful choice.

Although readers who had chosen euthanasia for their pets did so with mixed emotion, they agreed unanimously on one point: What matters most is the comfort and well-being of the pet. “The hardest decision I had to make was whether to let him live for my selfish needs or put him out of his misery,” wrote Gwen Vittor of Suffern, New York. “You are not doing your dog any favor by putting him through endless tests and surgeries to eke out a few precious months more of life together. Let go *before* the dog has suffered unbearably.”

Georgetta Goodman of El Dorado, Arkansas, agreed, citing a misconception I had never heard before. “I even went against my own statement, ‘I would never do this to my own pet’,” she wrote. “I had heard that this type of death was cruel to the animal, that the animal was still alive and only paralyzed. But my vet assured me that it was all right and it was as though the animal died a natural death.” Let us assure any other readers who may believe such a fallacy: Euthanasia is a swift, painless death.

When do you know it’s time to say good-bye? “When Tammy stops carrying around her ball, or stops watching her friends ‘the Kitties’ out the window, and her voracious appetite disappears, I will know that she is telling me she has lost her battle with cancer. But until then I will continue

to spend as much money and time as necessary to keep her well,” said Rose-Marie Laramée of Ludlow, Massachusetts.

Some readers recommended making euthanasia easier on a pet by having it done at home. This may not be feasible for everyone, depending on one’s household circumstances and whether or not one’s vet is willing to cooperate, but it is certainly one option.

Should you stay with your pet while it is euthanized? This, too, drew mixed responses. “Though this course was right for me, I would not recommend it for everyone,” said Linda Chudzinski of Beaumont, Texas. “It took a tremendous amount of control to keep from going to pieces. I had promised Jasper that I would not let him suffer in any way, and that included the emotional suffering that would have been brought on by seeing me break down. It was no easy task to maintain my composure.”

Another reader advised not to worry about breaking down, noting that the vet would think you very “coldhearted” if you didn’t show emotion at a time like this. That reader pointed out that if the vet didn’t share your love of animals, he or she probably wouldn’t be in the business.

“Owners may not realize it, but the staff (at least at our facility) feels a definite loss, too, when a patient dies or is put to sleep,” agreed the Kellers of Parkland, Florida.

The Empty House

“I could never come home to an empty house without at least one dog,” wrote one of the 71 percent of respondents who had other pets. Of these, 82 percent found that having other pets helped them cope with the loss of the one that died. Some cited companionship; some mentioned shared grieving; some didn’t feel comforted by the other pets, but noted that their presence required the owner to continue with daily routines of feeding, grooming and training. “I had to keep going for their sakes,” wrote one. “They gave more love and kept me busy.” Other readers, however, didn’t find the remaining pets a comfort. Too often, a surviving dog would remind one of the dog that was gone. Some readers noted that the remaining pets were cats and that they didn’t feel the same type of affection for them. “I resented them for being alive and well,” several readers responded. “I was afraid to show any affection to the other dog; it was too painful,” wrote one.

How about the surviving pets themselves – do they react to the loss? Only 13 percent of the respondents believe that their remaining pets showed no reaction to the loss of a companion. “No matter how many pets I have at the time, when one dies, the house seems empty,” wrote Pat Henry of Butler Pennsylvania. “There is a space left – a void – and all the animals seem to feel it. Most of my pets choose a ‘special friend’ from the menagerie, and when one of the pair dies, the remaining friend seems especially saddened. This passes in time – with lots of extra attention and love – and new friendships are formed.

“When we lost our beloved Old English Sheepdog, Brendan, to cancer, our other Sheepdog, Dulcie, became severely depressed,” said Henry. “All she wanted to do was eat and sleep. She wouldn’t play; she had to be dragged outside. She showed no interest in our other pets, either.

We solved the problem by going to our local animal shelter and adopting a lively puppy for Dulcie. No one can be depressed (or sleep) with a yappy, biting, distracting and irritating puppy climbing all over them! Dulcie decided *someone* had to take this youngster in hand and teach him some manners. With renewed interest in life, she applied herself to the task. Our new puppy captured Dulcie's heart – and ours as well!"

No Replacement

Is getting a new dog right away a good idea? Thirty percent of our respondents *wanted* a new dog immediately, but only 20 percent (and not all the same readers!) actually got one within a week. Most respondents (42 percent) felt it was advisable to wait a little while; 26 percent had still not replaced their dead pet at the time of writing, for one reason or another.

Respondents were nearly unanimous in saying that one *should* get another dog, sooner or later. The question of how soon was not so easily agreed upon. "Get another one right away," said many readers. "Replace the pet as soon as emotionally possible," said more cautious respondents. "Wait until you're ready," advised many more.

"One thing I would like to tell others who have lost a beloved pet," wrote Joyce Patrick of Phoenix, Arizona, "is that when you purchase another animal, remember that there is going to be a period when you will compare your new pet to the one that passed away. You will remember all the cute little tricks and things that your other pal did, and think that the new family member is not quite as good. Don't judge yourself for these feelings; they're natural. And don't judge your new pet, because in a short time it will do things that will make you love it just as much."

"After Cammie died, we dashed about madly to find 'another dog just like him'," recalled Celia Powell of North Rose, New York. "The result is that we have a sweet little girl who *looks* like Cam, but she's a nervous wreck: It was *months* before we stopped expecting her to be Cam and let her be herself!"

"I don't think it is wise to rush right out and purchase another pet", advised Carol Feck of Zoe, Kentucky. "I think when people do this, they try to transfer their feelings for their former pet toward the new one, and it is a hindrance in the long run. You *need* to allow yourself time to grieve, time for the shock and trauma of the death to lessen; your feelings must be worked through before you can accept the new pet for *itself*."

Children, notes Feck, may have a problem with this as well. Not until we adopted Patrick (the new dog) did I start to see that our daughter was still hurting deeply. After the newness of the puppy wore off, I saw resentment starting to surface, and negative comments. Then it hit me: She felt disloyal to Chadwick for allowing herself to love Patrick! I was able to talk to her about it, and after this, she was able to put all in perspective."

Barbara Yodu of Hartly, Delaware, believes – like many respondents – that the departed dog would want you to replace it. "I looked at Sheba's picture and thought about how she always got

upset when I was. She'd give me so many kisses if she thought something was wrong. Sheba would want me to open up my heart to another. Now I look at Sheba's picture in our living room and smile: She'd be happy for me."

Do Others Understand?

Most of our respondents were lucky: 30 percent reported that friends and family were also upset by the death of a pet, while 40 percent said that people close to them were at least supportive. "The difference between losing a pet and losing a human is that in losing a pet, you don't have the same support group going for you as with the loss of a human. There's no obituary, no rules of society that direct people to react to your loss (flowers, food, etc.) Often you're on your own in your workplace, school or wherever, surrounded by people who might equate your loss with losing another possession rather than losing a loved one, or losing 'just a dog, a replaceable dog.'"

This was the reaction of Charlie and Jenny Drastura of Huntington, West Virginia – but like many readers, they received support from their friends in spite of the problems. "We received flowers from one friend and cards and notes from others, and many phone calls to see if we all right."

Most readers found that those friends and relatives who were helpful were those, understandingly, who were also animal lovers. When you know such a person, respondents advised, don't be ashamed to pour your heart out to him or her, to cry, to let your feelings loose. Many readers reported that friends who reacted negatively to such feelings, or seemed not to care or understand, or made unfeeling comments ("It was just a dog") are now no longer friends! "I had all the reactions you mentioned from people," noted Mrs. D. Smith of Ruston, Louisiana. "But I also found that a lot of them were embarrassed by me grieving so openly." Nonetheless, most readers agreed that, "You should not feel ashamed or embarrassed to cry or mourn," and "Don't deny yourself the need . . . no matter what anyone says!"

Many respondents found comfort in the words of a friend or relative. "The only thing that comforted me in my time of bereavement was a letter that my brother wrote me," said one. "He said, 'Look forward and live life joyfully and lovingly, because on your death, as you make your journey into the heavens, he will be the first to greet you with his bark and his tail wagging. Then you and he will live forever, with no one ever taking him away again.'"

How To Cope

The wonderful suggestions respondents had for coping with the loss of a pet, or preparing for that eventual loss, are far too numerous to be printed here. I won't even make the claim that this is the "best of them", because everyone needs to find his or her own path in dealing with bereavement. But it helps to know that others have taken that path and have found words of advice to pass along to those who follow.

Understanding that your pet is going to die eventually is very important, to many readers. Others, however, point out that even when you understand that intellectually, it doesn't truly prepare you for the emotional trauma.

“A person should start thinking about dealing with the inevitable loss of a pet when it is about 5 years of age,” suggested Beverly Winger of Ansonia, Connecticut. “Death before that is unusual, and death after that is more difficult, because though the years ‘sweeten’ the relationship, they also add the memories that initially cause the pain. Ironically, though, the same memories that cause the hurt also bring the healing. They are what motivate us to start all over again, to add to the storehouse of memories, to begin a new relationship, and also to deal with the end . . . again.”

“Don’t take your pet’s health and life for granted,” urged Nancy Phillips of Seattle, Washington. “Just as with a human, treasure each moment with it and make it quality time. The time our pets are with us is all too short; don’t waste it.”

It is also important to prepare children, who may not understand death (do any of us?) and who may be especially disturbed by the loss of a special friend. Susan Kenney’s dog has severe kidney damage; he is also her 4-year-old daughter’s “best friend.”

“I’ve prepared her by explaining that he is sick and may die someday. We have read children’s books from the library dealing with a pet’s death. I prepare myself by trying to understand the disease and constantly monitoring the dog’s condition. But while Clifford is here I enjoy every minute with him.”

When death actually occurs, respondents mentioned a variety of mechanisms for coping. Many found that writing down their feelings was of great help. “Just writing to someone about this makes me feel better,” said Emily Martinez of Los Angeles. Many readers wrote poems to or about the dead pet. Others prepared diaries, describing the good times and happy memories. Several wrote letters to the pets themselves, thanking them for the good times.

Several respondents found that putting together some kind of memorial helped ease the grief. In many cases this involved the disposal of the pet – keeping the ashes of a cremated pet in a special urn or in a special location in the house or burying the pet with a headstone and planting flowers.

Mrs. D. Smith plans to freeze-dry her dog, Chelsea. This has not been an easy decision for her family, but they felt they wanted to keep the dog near them. “We have had terrible reactions from family and friends on our decision,” she wrote. We can understand and respect their feelings, but wish they could accept ours.”

More often, the monument takes the form of a special photo, a photo collage, or even a small shrine to the pet. My own memorial consists of buying a cat statue that resembled - it did not look exactly like - my cat; it is intended as an honor rather than a substitute.

“It is important to see and touch the deceased animal,” advised Rosemary Sanderson of Glendale, California. “This serves as confirmation that the animal is dead and did not appear to

suffer, and makes it more final in your mind. You won't be so apt to always be "looking" for the missing animal. Finality is important. Once you accept that, you can go on with the future. Many readers cleared away the dead animal's possessions – dish, toys and bed – right away, feeling that they were painful reminders of the loss. Sanderson disagrees. "Getting rid of pictures, collars, toys, etc., right after the animal's death is not wise. You punish yourself by removing the very things that brought you joy. I would often pick up a collar, toy or leash and remember walks we had or playful moments, and these things kept me 'in touch' with good memories – not the vague ones you would have if you eradicated all tangible evidence of the animal. We gave our replacement dog the deceased dog's things, and we feel it has helped." Many people recommend talking to a bereavement Counselor; to find one in your area, check the yellow pages and consult with your veterinarian. Several books were also recommended (see sidebar).

Most important, and the advice that uttered over and over by respondent after respondent, was to *accept* you feeling as normal and natural. Don't be ashamed, don't try to hold back your grief, don't try not to cry or mourn.

"No matter what anyone says, you every right to take grief over the loss of a pet seriously," said Kathi Wilson. "Time will find a way of healing the wound, as will another pet. There are so many unwanted pets longing for homes, love and affection, that it will help to know that although you have lost one, you can save the life of another. No relationship will be the same. Each pet is different and unique in its own way. In time, you will treasure what the lost pet brought you and look forward to what the new pet brings."

Look back on the good memories, the happy times, and forward to good times again. Only time truly heals the wound, and denying yourself that time can only make matters worse. When a pet dies, you may feel that you never wish to go through this again. Remembering the good times helps us understand that without a pet, you would never have had this pleasure, this unique loving relationship.

"Love for any living thing is beautiful," wrote one reader. You would not feel the pain if it had not been for the love, and the memory of that joyful experience could bring you the courage to turn your pain back into love again for a new animal.

Further Reading

SURVEY RESPONDENTS suggested several books that a person who has lost a pet, or who wishes to prepare for that loss, might wish to turn to for help and information. These are the books readers recommended; check with your veterinarian and reference librarian for others. If you find a helpful book that isn't on this list, please let us know about it!

Death and Dying. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. MacMillan Publishing Co., 866 3rd Ave., New York, NY 10022.

Life is Goodbye, Life is Hello. Alla Bozarth-Campbell, Ph.D. CompCare Publications, 2415 Annapolis Ln., Minneapolis, MN 55441: 1-800-328-3330.

Pet Loss: A Thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children. Herbert A. Neiburg and Arlene Fischer. Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. 10 E. 53rd St., New York, NY 10022.

Pet Loss and Human Bereavement. William J. Kay, Herbert A. Neiburg, Austin H. Kutscher, Ross M. Grey and Carole E. Fudin, Editors. Iowa State University Press, Ames IA 50010; A Foundation of Thanatology Text, 630 W. 168th St., New York, NY 10032.

When Your Pet Dies: How To Cope With Your Feelings. Jamie Quackenbush, MSW, and Denise Graveline. Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY

Your Pet By Gina Spadafori

The short life of a pet is not measured in time, but in love

The Patterns of one's life often are captured and defined by the all-too-short life of a very special animal.

I know this all too well now. I've been spending a lot of time remembering, analyzing and, yes, crying, after losing my 10-year-old dog Lance last week, a victim of the cancer that had finally come roaring back after more than 18 months of dormancy.

Two years ago this month, a veterinarian I didn't know, then a young associate at the hospital we patronized, told me Lance wouldn't make it through the summer, if he even made it through the next few hours. He told me this over the anesthetized form of my dog, who'd gone in for a biopsy and came out with a reconstructed bladder after the young veterinarian acted on a hunch that what he wanted to do might work.

It did. Lance recovered and thrived for that summer and the next one, as the vet, now out on his own, ended each of Lance's frequent examinations with a shake of his head and an expression of amazement. It was a precious time, too good to last, and just before Christmas, a smidgen of blood in the bottom of a test tube gave us the news we'd all feared: the cancer was back.

In the months that followed the tumors grew, and I anxiously watched for signs of discomfort. When the first ones came, last week, that same veterinarian, now counted among my friends, put Lance out of pain's way. We'd always had dogs in our family, but Lance was the first one that was mine and mine alone. I was almost 21 years old when I got him. After less than a year of living on my own, I had decided I couldn't live without a dog. I was in college then, with a low-paying job and an unknown future, but I knew I didn't want to take another step down that road without a dog at my side.

I'm just one of those people, I suppose, who doesn't feel right without a dog.

I made the calls, located a litter, and soon brought my gold-and-white fluffball home to a third-floor apartment in a building that didn't allow pets, and to a roommate who hadn't been consulted and was not amused.

The breeder had called the puppy Toots, but I christened him Lance, and so saddled him with an official registered name that is too silly and pompous to repeat.

The name Lance never fit him that well, either. He was a delicate, intelligent and fussy animal who acted grown up as a puppy, and maintained a regal aloof demeanor for the duration of his life. Alone with me, and with me alone, he was occasionally silly, but it was with the understanding that his unseemly behavior was our little secret. He was obsessively clean taking care to walk around puddles and spending hours grooming his tiny white paws into perfect shape. He was quite beautiful, and he knew it.

We didn't last long in that first apartment, and Lance went with me through more than a few moves and a long line of roommates, relationships, wild parties and strange situations. Lance was with me as I changed from a crazy college kid into a serious professional, from the foolishly frivolous person who'd buy a dog on a whim to a woman in the early stages of (sigh) middle age who plans her next dog acquisition two years in advance.

In all that time, he never changed. He was always well mannered and affectionate, and he made it clear that next to those neat little paws, I was the thing he liked most in this world. Everything else he mostly just tolerated – like the dogs that were to follow.

I suppose I should be ashamed to admit that the other dogs, though dearly loved, and painstakingly well cared for, have never reached the plane of existence Lance was on. In deference to my allergist, only one dog slept in my bedroom, and that dog was Lance. If only one dog got to go on errands, it was Lance. When my parents made it clear that one extra dog was the most they wanted when I visited, that one dog was Lance.

Lance was my one dog when there was only one dog. He never got very used to sharing, and I didn't really make him try. It'll never be that way again for any other dog, or for me.

I could write a book about the wonderful dog that was Lance, but all of the things I liked about him, all the things that made me smile, it was the way he behaved when I was upset that means the most to me now. Lance never liked to see me cry, and with Lance around, I never cried for long.

He'd put one of those perfect little paws on my knee, and shove his nose under my hand. If I ignored him, he'd grab that hand with his teeth, bearing down slightly and revving up a full-throated growl. He looked mighty tough, but his tail was wagging, and his eyes were laughing up at me, and soon I'd be smiling at the picture he made.

The first night he was gone was one of the worst of my life, but it was that memory of Lance that got me through it. Through my tears I could hear him growling; could feel the teeth on the back of my hand.

I smiled, as I always did, and realized then that he is with me still, and always will be.

Gina Spadafori is on the staff of The Bee. Send notices and questions to Your Pet, Cal-Life. The Bee, P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852. Please include your telephone number. Announcements are run on a space-available basis, and questions of general interest will be answered.

From “The Sacramento Bee” May 1988

ONLY THE LOVE REMAINS

By Jane Hutchison

On March 5, editor Jane Hutchison and her husband, Sheldon, had their first dog, Patches, euthanized. The following story describes the feelings and emotions surrounding this most traumatic event.

I've read the books, the brochures and the articles on how to handle grief at the death of an animal companion. My mind knows, maybe even accepts, the facts. Patches is dying. We don't know how much time is left, but it can't be long. The arrangements have all been made. She will die at home, surrounded by the people who love her most. Her veterinarian will give her the final injection that will take her life. We mustn't let her suffer. I'm an intelligent person: I understand what must be done.

My heart is another matter. It does not understand. It cannot accept. It cannot envision life without the little dog who has been part of me for more than 13 years. It aches to see her struggle, to watch her condition deteriorate. It feels the frustration of trying to entice her to eat, of cleaning up after her increasingly frequent accidents, of being so very tired because when she cannot sleep at night, I also remain awake.

"Anticipatory grief" they call it. It's most common among those whose animals suffer some terminal illness, whose deaths are prolonged. I see over and over again in my mind her death, her lifeless body, wrapped in my old blue sweatshirt which she so loves. Can the grief that comes after her death be any more intense than this? A silent, anguished scream forms in my throat. I sit in my office and cry, going through each day like automation. How will I know when the time is "right"? How can I take her life? How can I ask my friend, who had worked so hard to make Patches well, who became my friend because Patches and I spent so much time at the veterinary clinic, to now take away the very life she worked so hard to save?

"She'll tell you when she's ready." "She'll make the decision for you." But will she? She's a fighter . . . she survived distemper as a puppy, and she has continued to fight this disease. As long as she fights, how can I give up on her? She's thin, her muscles are weak and atrophied, she shakes uncontrollably at times. She gets disoriented, and the places where her fur was shaved have never regrown their soft, white coat. On her face she wears the remnants of thrice-daily medications. Her eyes most of all show her sickness. If, as it has been said, eyes are the windows to the soul, I do not want to see what they reveal.

Am I doing this for her, or for me? Do I love her so much I will do anything to keep her alive, regardless of the cost? Even if she tells me when she no longer wants to go on living, will I be able to recognize her message? Will I be *willing* to accept her message? She still has good days, or at least times of the day when she appears alert and active. Maybe the final decision can be postponed just a little longer. Maybe something dramatic will happen to tell me with great certainty that the time is right.

At my veterinarian's suggestion I take a few days off work to spend at home with Patches. She can't go for long walks with me, but she seems comforted just lying beside me on the couch. Her breathing is becoming increasingly labored. Her abdomen is becoming distended as it fills with fluid. Her appetite is gone, despite the appetite stimulants.

I lay down on the floor beside her, where she rests on a pile of blankets. With my ear against her chest, the congestion in her lungs is obvious. When I pick her up, she coughs and wheezes. I could call my veterinarian at home tonight . . . But maybe things will be better tomorrow. It's only been two days since the vet said she didn't think Patches was suffering, and that in her opinion that time had not yet come to euthanize her.

Patches spent a restless and sleepless night. Unable to breathe comfortably while lying down, she sat or stood up all night. In the darkness, I saw her looking at me, in a way she had never looked at me before. Sadly, I understood what she was telling me. "Mama, I hurt. I love you so very much, but I can't sleep, it's hard for me to breathe, and I don't want to eat. It's time to let me go." Eerily, my husband came to the same realization when he awoke.

I walked through the morning rain to the veterinarian clinic. "I need to see the doctor when she's free." I sat in the waiting room, the words I was about to utter echoing in my mind. As the doctor led me into the exam room and closed the door, the words came rousing out. "I think it's time. After listening to my description of Patches' condition, the doctor said quietly, "I can be there between 2:00 and 3:00." Between 2:00 and 3:00? So soon? "Let me check with my husband. He wants to be there, Too." This was it. The final decision was made. In less than 4 hours, my precious Patches would be dead.

There was so much to do in the few remaining hours. I felt detached, as though observing someone else. It was as though I was watching a movie playing at high speed. It wasn't Patches, some other dog. Patches would eat nothing but tortilla chips, so she was given all she wanted as her final meal. Feeling like a villain preparing the poison someone, I ground up three Phenobarbital tablets and dissolved them in water. These were given to her orally at 1:30, gently, with much love and many tears. Because her legs were so sensitive to needles as a result of numerous catheters and blood tests, our vet suggested the tablets first, to make her sleepy.

Then the fatal injection could be given without distress. At 2p.m., the doctor arrived. A fighter to the end, Patches resisted the drug's effects. As I held her on my lap, my husband knelt beside us. We spoke reassuringly to her, choking back the tears. Finally, as the medication took effect, her breathing became even more labored. The doctor was there in an instant, kneeling in front of us, large syringe of pink fluid in hand. As she gently extended Patches' hind leg and inserted the needle, the little dog stopped breathing. Peace at last . . . for her. For us the torment was just beginning. As she rested on my lap, head on my chest, her expression was one of great peace. No more did she ache from the cancer consuming her. No longer did she struggle to breathe. Our decision was correct. After thirteen years and two months of devotion and love, she deserved the peace that only death could bring.

Her fur was as soft as when she was a puppy as I buried my face in it. “She’s only asleep, she’s not really dead. She’s going to open her eyes and look up at me any time.” The reality of her death had not yet hit. Her friend and companion of 12 years, Samantha, curled at my feet, as if waiting for Patches to get up. Or was she protecting her friend? Seeming to sense that something was amiss, Sam remained strangely quiet.

Patches was buried with her favorite sweatshirt, in a spot warmed by the sun. As she was laid to rest, it began to rain, as though the heavens, too, mourned her loss.

For days afterward, I went to the bedroom to check on her upon returning home. Old habits linger a long time. Waking up at night, I would raise from my pillow to look at her. Is she comfortable? Is she warm enough? “Bye, Patch. Bye Sam.” The familiar words, said countless times as I left the house, slipped out before I realized what I had said.

The ultimate act of love, the final act of kindness. So why did I feel so guilty? I wouldn’t let her suffer. I did what was best for her. Did I wait too long? Not long enough? Is there something else I could have done? Despite the assurances of our veterinarian and others that we did the right thing, that there was nothing more to do for her, the guilt continued to haunt me. Did I have her euthanized because I was tired, physically and emotionally? Did I make the decision when I did for my convenience, rather than for her sake? A subconscious anger churned with the guilt and the hurt. My readings had prepared me intellectually for these feelings, but that made them no easier to accept. I wanted no part of the other two dogs in the family. I realized later that I resented them for still being alive, as well as wanting to avoid the pain feeling close to them would ultimately bring.

Her body is gone now. All that remains are the photographs, the memories and the love. Patches was special in so many ways. She was our first dog. It was as a result of adopting her that I began my long involvement in humane work. She taught me so many things. She was intelligent, fun and so very patient through all her medical exams and treatments. She became a favorite of the staff of the clinic where she was a regular visitor the last few months of her life. She trusted us so much that she accepted with great dignity whatever we did. Never an outgoing dog, her love of family was obvious in a quiet, unobtrusive way.

Much has been written about dealing with the grief and other emotions that accompany the death of a beloved animal. My feelings were not unique, and understanding them made them no less painful. Most important in getting through the difficult days following Patches’ death was being able to share my feeling with others who understood. No one ever said, “She’s only a dog. You can always get another one.” My friend/veterinarian was a great help immediately following the euthanasia, just by being there to listen. Being able to take time off from the demands of work, taking a long drive alone, going for a hard run, sharing tears and memories with my husband, and receiving the sympathy and support of family and co-workers all helped. It was also important to realize that mourning the death of a beloved family member, whether human or non-human, was natural. I was not embarrassed by my tears . . . I hurt, and the tears were a natural part of hurting.

Eventually we will take another unwanted dog into our home. No dog can ever replace Patches, but sharing with another dog the love she left us seems the only fitting way to honor her memory. Although Patches is gone, her spirit, her memory and her love will always remain with us. Sleep well, little one.

TOM STIENSTRA

OUTDOORS

Coping with the death of a loved one

The biggest challenge I've ever known was trying to be the person my dog always thought I was. When I first got my dog, I was lost like a piece of driftwood floating about the open sea. All I had was an old pickup truck, sleeping bag and a typewriter, and I was adrift, with no job and thin roots, wandering about the West, camping, hiking and fishing, wondering how I'd even pay for the gas for the next trip.

Then I got this dog, black mainly. Turned out he was just as lost as I was. In fact, if he wasn't claimed that day, he was headed for a permanent home in the sky. Back then a lot of people felt I was a walking time bomb; erratic and ornery. But right off, that dog loved me anyway, and suddenly, I had something to live up to. Some people said I "saved him", but it was always the other way around.

That was nearly 17 years ago. And last week, as I shoveled the last scoop of dirt on his grave, I felt the full force of the impact he had on my life, as well as how our personalities had become woven together as we roamed years after year on adventures across the land.

Many people who love their dogs or cats will understand. As many review their lives, some automatically divide their memories into different eras according to the pets they have owned. You see, while people are always passing in and out of your daily experiences, your dog stays. There is no animal more loyal, a creature with a rare tolerance for our many shortcomings.

Seventeen years ago, that black dog needed me so bad that he followed me everywhere, so I named him "Shadow." But the name didn't take. Then when he got left home alone one evening for a few hours, and proceeded to tear down several curtains in the house, my brother Bob said, "He's a reb." And the dog's ears perked up. So his name became Reb, then a week later, Rebel. From that moment on, he became my 24-hour-a-day partner. I'd drive that pickup truck around, my buddy right with me all the time, then we'd get out and hike, camp or fish, making each day a discovery. Each morning, I would start the day by writing a story on that old typewriter, and that's when Rebel would curl up at my feet, asleep with his head on my boots, a habit he kept right up to the last day.

He could out run a deer, out swim a duck, and outwit just about anything but a skunk, at least the first encounter with one anyway. One late evening at a Sierra camp, a bear strolled up and drank out of his water bowl, and Rebel faked sleeping through the whole affair, until the bear left. Smartest move I've ever seen. But just when you'd think you figured out his logic, he'd set out on some mission of individual craziness.

Once he crashed through ocean breakers and chased a sea lion a quarter mile out to sea, then swam back and bodysurfed in to the beach. He loved taking flying leaps off ledges into ponds, then swim for 30 or 40 minutes, chasing ducks around, sometimes even catching one. On one hike, he sniffed out a fawn that had fallen into a dry well shaft, 12 feet deep, jumped in right alongside – barked for my attention, and in the process rescued the deer by bringing me to the scene. Rebel became such a happy, free spirit that he had almost a prance to his walk. Even as he neared 15, people were amazed at his physical condition and mental spark.

But Rebel's hearing became quite poor; though friends noticed that he appeared to understand everything I said by watching my mouth. The strength in his legs began to wane, and I had a miniature staircase built so he could still climb into my truck. When I petted him, I began to notice his shoulder blades, that he was losing weight.

But he was happy in his retirement, still full of spark, demanding play time and ride time in the truck, still sleeping on my boots every morning as I typed away, always managing to curl up on a corner of my sleeping bag at camps.

I know the price of living is dying, and you try to prepare yourself for the inevitable. But the shock when he had a stroke at my feet one morning, paralyzing him, was beyond anything I could have imagined.

After several hours talking with him, I put his head in my hands, rubbed that favorite spot on his forehead, and told him it was time for him to go to heaven. He gave me a lick on my check, aware of what was happening, and then the vet put him to sleep.

As I cupped his body in my arms, I felt adrift for the first time in 17 years, lost at sea without a heading, devastated and alone. A moment later, I sensed something rise from him, produce a profound sensation, hover for a moment, then suddenly vanish. His body then seemed empty, a shell.

Later, a friend clipped two blooming iris from the front yard and gave them to me, and I placed one in a vase on a table, the other on Rebel's burial site, set in a pristine forest that will always remain untouched. In two days the iris in the vase wilted, the bloom withering to nothing. But 11 days later, the one on the grave was still fresh and blooming.

An Indian friend of mine, Dancing Water, said such things can be explained.

"The flower in your house was a symbol of your loss," Dancing Water said. "The flower on the grave is a symbol of his spirit, which lives on. It is a message to you that he is where he belongs now, and for you to now live on, to celebrate life as you know it, and live it fully again."

While there are two expeditions and several excursions awaiting, I find I keep looking for my old buddy, expecting him to suddenly come bounding along, just as he had thousands of times on our trips together.

But though he is not there, it is onward I must go. Over the years I have not only shared a friendship like no other, but in his passing, I have divine force, and I know there will come a day when we will meet again.

Owning a pet can be a double-edged sword

By Don McIntire

Much has been written about the therapeutic value that a household pet provides the withdrawn, live-alone senior. And there is no question that remarkable turn arounds have been affected by a loving dog or a whimsical cat in bringing such a person into a happier, now-oriented individual. But few of these articles point out the trauma that an elderly person may go through upon the death of that pet. Grief over the loss of a beloved dog, for instance, can be more intense and long-lasting than the death of a close relative.

Let me give some personal testimony.

It was with some misgivings that, having just moved into a basically “no-pets” apartment complex, my wife and I agreed to take in two homeless dogs.

Lil Bit would barely fill up the cup of your two hands when we got her. She had a terrier’s perky ears and curling tail with the limpid, slightly bulging eyes of her other half – Chihuahua. The genteel, dainty ways of Lil Bit contrasted nicely with the roughshod persona of Peppy, a male chauvinist toy poodle. Early on, Peppy let it be known that he would eat first at the doggy dish – he would be first to jump up on the sofa, squeezing Lil Bit aside should she take his spot next to my wife’s knees – making it also known that it was his male birthright to bark longest and loudest at nothing in particular when let outside.

Bluntly put, Peppy (a Taurus-born) was not the smart, thinking dog that Lil Bit (Gemini) was. By example, should an invader cross her territory, Lil Bit would challenge with a hysterical yapping – then back away to fight another day.

Peppy, by contrast, scorning retreat, would bull his full speed ahead – damn the torpedoes – Peppy took on all breeds all weight disadvantages. Torn ears, patches of missing hair, a gimpy leg were battle scars that attested to the one-sided outcome of these doggy duels. In softhearted but guarded moments, we would let Peppy off his leash to romp in the neighboring park or to chase an alley cat. Such unfettered freedom, however, came to an end when a guy owning a pit bull moved into the adjoining complex. Peppy now was allowed off his leash to exercise only in the enclosed dog run yard in the shadow of our apartment.

It was a heavenly blue Sunday morning that Peppy, let out to do his job in this enclosure, found a broken board and brazenly trotted across the street to taunt the newly arrived pit bull. Ava had just put on breakfast coffee when Charlie, our next door neighbor, knocked to tell us he’d found our poodle, badly injured, lying motionless in a field behind the apartment complex. Badly injured was Charlie’s kind phrasing to describe a mortally wounded Peppy, who we found lying in a pool of his own blood with a severed jugular vein. The feisty little guy had obviously fought his last doggy duel.

Body still warm, but life ebbing fast, Peppy was rushed downtown in a futile search for a veterinarian who would (Lord help us) be open that fated Sunday. We found none. Block by block, my wife could feel the poodle's body, cradled in her arms, grow colder. The last spark of life had fluttered out before we reached home.

The rag doll body was laid out in the wicker basket that Peppy has shared, sometimes reluctantly, with Lil Bit the past 10 years. His head was raised slightly to rest in a tiny pillow – a favored sleeping position in life. The wicker basket was then covered with a favorite crazy quilt blanket – much as a flag is draped over a soldier's casket.

And then it was time for sobs and tears and choked up, unintelligible words – words that spoke of a numb disbelief, of anger, frustration and sorrow that the life of so vital – so ornery, if you will – a dog could be snuffed out that quickly.

We had Peppy cremated, his ashes barely filling a 2-inch by 3-inch by 4-inch cedar box that we intended to have interred at the Bubbling Springs Pet Cemetery in Napa County when finances improved.

In the freshness of our sorrow, well-meaning friends tried to console us with such as: “Hey you’ve still got Lil Bit,” or, “Just wait, it’ll be no time before you’ll be getting another poodle like Peppy.”

This only caused the gloom to deepen, the tears to flow. How can you so casually dismiss a beloved pet's death? Why don't they know that you can't just put his ashes in a little cedar box and say, “Well, that's that” any more than you could casually dismiss the passing of a close family relative?

Ten years of poodle memories are not laid to rest in a little cedar box that you stash away in a cubbyhole of your roll top desk like a classily displayed gold trophy.

As with a deceased human being, those memories must not be bottled up. A grieving time for pets must be allowed those who suffer the loss of such. Nor need grieving be confined to the sad, the sorrowful, and the inconsolable memory. Grieving in this context is the recalling of the endearing eccentricity, the protective vigilance, and the unquestioning devotion of a pet. Dredging up many a misty-eyed recollection, my wife and I were finally able to accept the abrupt loss of our tough little Peppy. Although I must confess I still turn and do a double take whenever a silver-haired toy poodle dashes across the city park, barking furiously at nothing in particular.

Don McIntire also writes a gardening column that appears on Sundays

From “The Vallejo Times-Herald” January 1990

A Family Remembers “Shadow”

Yahrzeit or “year’s time,” is a Yiddish term referring to the annual Jewish observance of the anniversary of a loved one’s death. Traditionally, that includes parents, children, spouses and siblings. Starting on the eve of the yearly commemoration, one lights a 24-hour remembrance candle at home, and recites the Mourner’s Kaddish (Hebrew for “Sanctification”), a prayer focusing not on death and bereavement but on the sanctity of God, the Creator, and, hence, on the holiness of creation and the affirmation of life. The Kaddish occurs in the context of services held in a synagogue setting or elsewhere, in the presence of a minyan (a quorum consisting of ten Jewish men over the age of 13, according to orthodoxy, or ten Jewish adults, male or female, in religious egalitarian practice).

Some also observe Yahrzeit in memory of revered teachers and leaders. In any event, it is the death of a human being that we commemorate in this way. In the month of August, however, the Axelrad family also observes Shadow’s Yahrzeit.

A beautiful dog, big and black, mostly Australian Sheepdog with a dash of Setter in him, Shadow dies in August of 1993 after having spent 15 years as an integral member of the Axelrad family. He came to us as a three or four year-old stray, earning his typecast name by having shadowed my wife home one day from the local High School, where she teaches. Though Berta and I, and all four of our children, fell in love with the dog at first sight, and though he, too, seemed to reciprocate the sentiment, we immediately summoned the town’s Animal Control Officer, who corralled Shadow to the local Dog Pound. After all, we reasoned, Shadow must be lost, having strayed from a family that must surely miss him and want him back. Reflecting that family’s training efforts was the metal choke collar he was wearing around his neck. Moreover, we Axelrads already had a dog, “Naval”, (Hebrew for “Beautiful One”), a much-loved, four-year-old Airedale Terrier, and we were skeptical as to how the dogs would co-exist in our home. We also questioned our own stamina. At the time, we were a four-child, one-car family, with each parent a busy, heavily committed professional.

Still, we were sad to see Shadow taken away. Telephoning the veterinarian at the Pound that very day to inquire about his well being, we learned that he was well but that his would be a short-lived destiny; if unclaimed within eight days, he would be “put to sleep”. All week long, we phoned the Pound daily; on the eighth day, Shadow joined our household.

Our worth as individuals, our sense of ourselves, the quality of our relationships and the value of our contributions to Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world, would all improve, said I, if we were to put increasingly into action the kinds of qualities that Shadow, the Dog, manifested throughout his life.

Without ever really becoming mutually loving siblings, Nava and Shadow mostly lived together in peace. For his part, Shadow made friendly and affectionate overtures toward Nava from the very start. She, however, would have no part of it. Jealous of the interloper and protective of what she perceived to be her turf, Nava repaid Shadow's affection with alternating reactions of cool unresponsiveness and hostile growling, all of which he accepted with his characteristic good nature. Eventually, they reached an uneasy truce, followed by a long-term *modus vivendi* of mutual tolerance.

Five years later, Nava died of natural causes, leaving Shadow as our sole canine clansperson. I like to think that, down deep, in their own ways, Nava and Shadow really loved one another, and that Shadow missed her. Who knows? What they certainly did share was the love that each of them gave and received from all of us Axelrads.

Shadow's canine predecessors in our family were all purebred "Yof I" (Hebrew colloquialism for "Pretty One"), a beautiful Brittany Spaniel who was killed in front of our home by a passing car, "Mahzik" (Yiddish slang for "Mischievous one"), a Wirehaired Fox Terrier who went blind, and "Nava." Each of them possessed endearing traits. We loved and missed every one of them. Apart from his longevity, however, Shadow, the mutt, was singular and had a special place in our hearts and in the hearts of our children's "significant others."

Neighbors and children, veterinarians, nurses and attendants, all loved Shadow. So much so, that on Rosh HaShanah (the Jewish New Year) two years ago, fresh from mourning Shadow's death, I was moved to eulogize him in the presence of my large and stalwart congregation. Present at services that day was a longtime congregant, himself a Veterinary School Professor and Dean, who coaxed me into committing my message to paper.

Shadow's attributes recommended themselves for emulation, I suggested to my prayer-community. Our worth as individuals, our sense of ourselves, the quality of our relationships and the value of our contributions to Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world, would all improve, said I, if we were to put increasingly into action the kinds of qualities that Shadow, the Dog, manifested throughout his life. Honing in on specifics, I emphasized the following:

- Loyalty, trustworthiness, reliability, steadfastness
- Good-natured friendliness
- Patience, long-suffering tolerance
- Expressiveness, demonstrativeness
- Responsiveness to affection, unconditional love
- Protectiveness, devotion to others
- Sensitivity, gentleness (combined with an appropriate measure of toughness)
- A trusting spirit (combined appropriately with cautiousness, vigilance, watchfulness)
- Good and instinctively caring companionship
- Smartness and "seichel" (Hebrew and Yiddish for "common sense")
- Having a bark worse than a bite

- Strength and stamina
- Courage (combined with an appropriate recognition of discretion sometimes being “the better part of valor”)
- Impishness (coupled with a touch of conscience)
- Contentedness with one’s lot (though one friend maintains that, in another life after this earthly one she might elect to return as Shadow, considering that he was well cared and provided for, much loved and had free reign in our home, including sleeping on our bed, whether in our absence or presence)

Doubtless, many dogs, and some humans, too, are endowed with Shadow’s considerable gifts; not for a moment do I imply that they were uniquely his. Rather, in memorializing dear Shadow let me conclude with the hope that these canine qualities will come more and more to typify the outlook and behavior patterns of us, God’s human children.

How sorrowful and bereaved we were to see Shadow go. Terribly weak and in visibly severe pain, he suffered badly from the maladies that are the concomitants of old age. At home that final morning, and at the Veterinarian’s office, we bade him our last gentle and loving farewell. Rob, the significant other of our eldest daughter, Marcy, brought along a bagful of grapes for Shadow to munch. Shadow had always had a special penchant for grapes, but they never agreed with his digestive system, compelling us to eliminate them from his diet.

As the doctor compassionately administered the painless, lethal injection, we stayed with Shadow and held him, to the very end. We felt sad. Very sad. Yet we were relieved, too, that he was no longer suffering, that he was free of pain.

We still remember him, with joyful and loving reminiscence. His ashes, stored temporarily in a small urn, await burial. Rob ordered a simple yet beautiful gravestone/marker, inscribed with Shadow’s name and years. At Yahrzeit time this August, 1995, our family will come together to inter his ashes in the tranquil, lakefront countryside of New Hampshire.

Shadow’s gifts and strengths, we hope, will somehow be recycled – in us, in others, in the world around.

Rabbi Albert S. Axelrad is Chaplain and Hillel Director at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Latham thanks Franklin M. Loew, D.V.M., PhD., Dean of Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, for bringing this eulogy to our attention.

From The Latham Letter, Fall ‘95

When a Beloved Friend Dies

By Sharon Callahan

It is always difficult to lose someone we love, but the death of an animal companion often touches us even more profoundly than the death of a human being. Our animal companions at times grow dearer to us than our closest human friends. They love us so unconditionally and with such great presence, that their passing can have a profound emptiness in the very deep recesses of our heart and soul.

The love of an animal permits us to unfold, to open up, drop our defenses and be naked, not only physically but also psychologically and spiritually as well. With an animal we let ourselves be seen instead of hiding behind our personalities, our cultures, our jobs, our clothing or our makeup. They know us as no one else does, in our private joys, angry rages, and deepest despair, in sickness and in health. All the while their calm steady presence companions us with an unwavering love like few others on this earth. Our animal companions see through us to the very soul of our soul encouraging the unfolding of a sacred trust. If there is such a thing as a soul mate, then surely this is it.

Because most companion animals perform so magnificently their self appointed tasks of teaching us about unconditional love, devotion and surrender, we often experience with them what we have only dreamed of with our human loved ones. *When the animal dies, there is a natural tendency, in addition to the grief we experience over their passing, to attach to it grief we have over not feeling loved in the same way by the human beings in our lives.* We may also experience an outpouring of emotion that we would like to be able to express to our human mates, lovers and friends and feel we cannot. Our bereavement, then, tends to evolve into a nonspecific grief over the lack of love we witness in the world in general, the absence of which is made all the more noticeable by the absence of our four legged friend.

Our society in general denies death. Youth is worshiped, old folks are whisked off to “the home”, and the topic of death is avoided by almost everyone. *The witnessing of the full spectrum of an animal’s life brings us face to face with our own mortality and is often the most intimate glimpse of illness, aging and death that we may ever get.* The attendant fear further complicates the grief of losing an animal.

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When an animal dies, we often experience feelings of guilt and remorse that compound our grief yet again. Could I have done more for my beloved companion? Why was I so preoccupied with my work that I failed to notice his illness? Did the treatment plan I chose to follow make him suffer more? These questions and many others may haunt us for weeks, months or possibly years. *So many books have been written about the pain of losing a loved one; yet most barely mention the pain of losing an animal companion and none that I have found touch upon the remorse and guilt that often compound the grief of losing an animal friend.*

If you have feelings of deep grief after the death of a human loved one, family and friends understand and offer love and support and are willing to listen with compassion as you express your sorrow. You are often given time away from work to absorb, reflect on, and adjust to your experience. But what about grieving the loss of a beloved animal friend? *It often seems that no one cares or understands. Sometimes you are even met with impatience, "after all, it was only an animal."* It is natural, then, to feel that no one understands your pain.

Many people have never been blessed with, or felt for themselves, the true love of an animal. *They are incapable of understanding that your love for an animal may surpass your love for the humans that are the closest to you. It is a different bond, in a way, more profound; something only the heart understands.* What I have learned over the years, as a student of grief and of many spiritual traditions, is that no guru, master or friend, no matter how enlightened can comfort the heart that believes it has lost what it holds so dear. Whether grieving ourselves, consoling a grieving friend, often the most useful thing we can do is to simply tell our story. For in the story of our own journey through the gates of grief, or in bearing witness to the grief of another, we can at least legitimize the experience and make it Sacred.

When my little cat Shoji died I was grief stricken for many months. Although I have experienced several tragic losses in my lifetime none of these brought me close to the intensity of the grief I felt losing Shoji. *Some time after Shoji died an acquaintance who had become impatient with my grieving process said to me, "Its only a cat for heaven's sake, why don't you just get another one."* Just get another one! My soul mate, my teacher, guru in gray fur. When my Grandmother died several years earlier, no one had said, "Why don't you get another grandmother?" God spoke to me through Shoji the same way he had spoken to me through my lovely Grandmother. Perhaps she herself had sent him to me from heaven ... an angel with whiskers! He had shared with me the most difficult period of my life and knew me like no one else ever had. What would I do without my dear companion? I felt isolated and totally alone with my feelings. How could I possibly tell my family or even my closest friends that I was more devastated by the loss of a cat than by the loss of my Father!

To make it all the more painful I was haunted for many months by feelings of responsibility for Shoji's death. I had been between jobs and homes and had left him with loving friends. He had taken to waiting along the road for my car. Being a little grey cat just the color of asphalt this was a very dangerous thing for him to do. When he was hit and killed by a car, I thought I would never recover from the anguish I felt knowing that I was at least in part responsible for his death and the pain he must have felt. An image of him being hit played over and over in my mind. He

had experienced nothing but love and kindness from the time he was six weeks old. To think of him dying in pain was almost unbearable.

...in the story of our journey through the gates of grief or in bearing witness to the grief of another, we can at least legitimize the experience and make it Sacred.

In the weeks that followed Shoji's death, I often awoke at night crying for him. I would fall back asleep and then awaken to his warm sweet smell and the feel of his fur on my face. He told me not to be sad any longer and that his death had been planned for the benefit of both of us. Shoji continued to visit me nightly for several weeks, thanking for our time together and for teaching him about Buddha and Jesus. He said that as he traveled through the astral plane after death he had been tempted by flocks of yellow birds and tantalizing things to smell and eat, but that he had remembered what I had told him about focusing on the light and he had made it safely to the other side and was awaiting a suitable rebirth. He said he was very much enjoying the wonderful light feeling for not having a body.

BELOVED FRIEND

Over the next few days Shoji told me many wonderful things, the best of which are listed here. He said to share them with those who might understand.

Companion animals are especially cared for by the angels after their death and lovingly assisted in the selection of their next incarnations. In fact, angels and companion animals share a very similar job ministering to human beings in the ways they do; angels from the side of spirit and companion animals from the material side of things. It's a kind of dual guardianship. When an animal dies there is a great reunion in heaven.

Many companion animals are attendant spirits to humans, and a particular animal soul may attend to a particular human being over and over again in different forms, sometimes from the realm of spirit and sometimes on the physical plane. It is unfair, though, for us to require that they come back to us, for it may be better for their own growth that they incarnate elsewhere for a while.

In our time, many master beings take the form of companion animals to assist people through times of rapid spiritual expanding. These beings often come into incarnation for very specific reasons and when their task is complete they simply leave. Shoji had come to assist me through an illness, near death experience and re-orientation to the world. He had simply completed the job he had come to do and it was time for him to go.

Animals don't fear death as human beings do. They just slip out of their furred or feathered coats and go on to the next assignment.

The experience of grief is a great gift . . . for the heart that breaks is just opening again.

There is no need for forgiveness or atonement, for forgiveness and atonement are real only from the perspective of separation and we are not separate from one another. The best definition of atonement is the world itself . . . ATONE-MENT! If we truly feel one with our animal companion there is no need to make amends . . . for all is whole and complete, known and understood.

Companion animals are especially
Cared for by the angels After their
death And lovingly assisted In the
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Beneath our fur, feathers, scales or skin we are all of the same Great Spirit.
Shoji said the biggest lesson is this: don't hold love back... don't put conditions on it...love now... give all your love away in each moment. Don't be a love miser, be a love fountain. Keep the door of your heart open wide.

I have found flower essences to be of invaluable assistance in releasing attachment and expressing grief in a transformative way. Essences that are particularly helpful during the grieving process include: Angel's Trumpet, Forget-Me-Not, Shooting Star, Penstemon, Bleeding Heart, Sweet Chestnut, California Wild Rose, Scarlet Monkeyflower, Echanacea, Chrysanthemum and Yerba Satna.

The topic of Assisting Grieving Animals will be covered in a forthcoming article.

If you find yourself suffering and alone after losing an animal, or during his illness or last days, I urge you to reach out for support. If you are unable to find the support you need with family and friends, don't suffer in silence . . . you are not alone. These organizations offer grief-counseling referral nationwide:

EMISSARIES OF ST. FRANCIS
Mt. Shasta, CA 916-926-6424

THE DELTA SOCIETY
Renton, WA 206-226-7357

From Mount Shasta DIRECTIONS, Summer 1994

Pet Loss Resources

Pet Loss Support Groups/Hotline

The San Francisco SPCA Pet Loss Support Group meets on the first Tuesday of every month at 250 Florida St. (at 16th St.) from 7:30-9pm. It is free and there is no need to sign up. Call 415-554-3050 for more information.

The Peninsula Humane Society Pet Loss Support Group meets on the second Thursday of every month from 7-8:30pm. No need to sign up. For more information, call 650-340-7022 x344.

Pet Loss Support Hotline:
(800) 565-1526 or (530) 752-4200 Monday-Friday 6:30-9:30pm (West Coast time) is staffed by volunteers from the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine.

Pet Loss Counselors

Dr. Betty Carmack, R.N., Ed.D.
Grief Counseling for pet owners
(415) 334-5036

Web Sites

www.petloss.com/ www.pet-loss.net
www.superdog.com/petloss.htm
www.deltasociety.org/dsn000.htm
www.cvmb.colostate.edu/changes

Reading Materials

Grieving the Death of a Pet
By Dr. Betty Carmack, 2003

Losing A Best Friend, a collection of articles compiled by the San Francisco SPCA, 415-554-3050

Pet Loss: A Thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children
By Herbert A. Nieburg and Arlene Fischer, Harper & Row, 1982

When Your Pet Dies: How To Cope With Your Feelings
By James E. Quackenbush and D. Graveline, Simon and Schuster, 1985

Living Through Personal Crisis
By Ann Kaiser Stearns, Ballantine, 1984

Coping With Sorrow On The Loss of Your Pet
By Moira Anderson, M.Ed, Alpine Blue Ribbon Books, 1996

Books For Children

Helping Children to Cope with Separation & Loss

By Claudia Jewitt, Harvard Common, 1992

Snowflake in My Hand

By Samantha Mooney, Delacorte, 1983

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney
By Judith Viorst, Atheneum, 1975

When A Pet Dies

By Fred Rogers, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1988