

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF A LOVED ANIMAL COMPANION

By

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Today, perhaps more than ever before in history, our animal companions have played a more important role and assumed a greater meaning and significance in the lives of millions of Americans. It is estimated that there are approximately 68 million dogs and 73 million cats living in U.S. households, and that the pet industry generates nearly \$36 billion dollars in revenues per year. As our lives become increasingly stressful and challenging – as our world becomes increasingly complex, perilous, impersonal and technologically oriented, our pets have become more valued, respected and appreciated. Our pets have and continue to become beloved members of our families who provide us with unconditional love, loyalty and acceptance.

Pets are also often our very best and dearest friends, companions and confidants. In a world full of tumult, conflict and fear, their mere presence is comforting, calming and consoling. They offer us a safe haven, a comfort zone, the opportunity to relax, let down our guard, live “in the moment”. and to be genuinely ourselves. They do not judge us and they accept us exactly as we are. They love us no matter what. In addition, our animal companions are affectionate, amusing and entertaining. They are literally “warm and fuzzy” and offer us true love and affection. They even make us laugh at their antics, engage us in play and exercise and help us forget about our problems. They keep us from being lonely and isolated. Although we live in a world full of stress and anxiety, tension and violence, hostility and negativity and although many of our lives are fraught with fear and dread of what tomorrow may bring, our beloved pets teach us to live in the present moment and with spontaneity. They teach us to accept what is...not to fear the future or dwell on the past.

Many of us find ourselves living far away from family and friends – our professions, opportunities for higher education and improved financial circumstances, military service, etc. are responsible for our relocation from home and family to new communities, cities, countries and even continents. We are strangers in a new environment and culture. It is difficult to make new friends and to establish meaningful and heartfelt relationships. We live alone. We work alone – many of us barely connecting with one another – many of us interfacing with technology rather than with other human beings.

We seek contact with others – we are in need of friendship, communication and support. Many of us, unable to forge bonds with fellow human beings, adopt animal companions. They become a part of our lives, hearts and homes. There are no secrets between us. We come to know each other intimately. We forge a deep, powerful and genuine bond with them, and in many cases, incorporate and integrate them into members of our families – adopted children, siblings, nieces, nephews, etc.

Few, if any human beings, can offer the beauty and purity, nobility and vulnerability of spirit, loyalty, unconditional love, acceptance, forgiveness and empathy of an animal companion. They are genuinely who they are and allow us, in turn, to be who we genuinely are. There is no pretense, no façade, no agenda, no artifice on the part of our pets – what we see is what we get! We can sigh with relief and satisfaction as we return home to be greeted by our pets after a hard, stress-filled and challenging day at work. Our pets welcome us with unabashed enthusiasm, affection and joy. And we let down our guard – knowing that we can change into our sweat clothes and play on the floor or in the back yard or play room with our animal “kids”. We can happily interact with sentient friends who don’t judge or talk back to us, friends who calm us down and bring us back to reality with priorities intact, friends who seem to understand us “better” than any of our other human friends.

Our animal companions benefit us emotionally, spiritually and physiologically. There is ample scientific data which proves that pet increase both longevity and quality of life. They provide physical and emotional well-being. The simple act of petting an animal friend has proven to be of significant physical and psychological benefit. A pet has a calming effect. Blood pressure is reduced. Heartbeat is improved. Resistance to disease is heightened and tension and anxiety are decreased. Our animal companions reduce stress, fear and anger. They also decrease sadness, loneliness and depression.

As we are their caregivers and responsible for their physical and emotional well-being, they provide many of us with a reason for getting up in the morning – we are responsible for nurturing, communicating and providing love, exercise, proper diet, nutrition and health care for our animal companions. They are sentient creatures who communicate in a language beyond mere words. When we are alone – whether we are single, young, elderly, widowed, separated, or divorced, these beloved ones by means of their simple presence, comfort and console us; they provide love and affection at home as well as on our errands, vacation and travel time. They’re with us 24/7 – when we are reading, writing, at the computer, listening to the radio, watching television, cooking, entertaining, relaxing out on the patio, gardening, socializing, even traveling and on vacation with us. Our animals play a very important role in our general well-being and the way in which we deal with hardship and stress. And the number and intensity of the significant losses (human and otherwise) we have sustained during our lives, will help determine the intensity and amount of time and energy we spend grieving their loss when they die. For many of us, our animal companions have afforded us the most stable, comforting and comfortable relationships we have experienced. Yet there are many humans who simply do not understand how deeply we love and care for our animals and who have personally never known the beauty, inspiration and wisdom to be derived from having extensive contact with a loved animal companion. They do not comprehend all the gifts these animals bring to us. For from our pets we learn of life and death, the cycles and seasons of life, the majesty and grandeur of the natural world and the pivotal link we share with the natural world. There are far too many people who have not had the privilege of experiencing the joy, depth and beauty of knowing a beloved animal companion, yet they may benefit from the words of the French poet and philosopher, Anatole France, who said, “Unless one has loved an animal a part of one’s soul remains

unawakened.” Those of us privileged enough to know and love animals benefit profoundly and learn so many lessons about life and death; through the observation of and interaction with our pets, we learn much about the meaning and purposefulness of all life and the interconnectedness of all living creatures who share the earth.

From the moment we adopt a loving animal companion, our lives are irrevocably transformed. We learn to SHARE our hearts and our lives with these magnificent creatures; we hopefully make a lifetime commitment to provide health, peace happiness, well-being and harmony to the beautiful ones we adopt. We assume responsibility for their care and well-being. We do our best to ensure that they will share a happy, healthy, peaceful and fulfilling life with us and our other family members. Seldom do we pause and think about the fact that their lives are generally shorter than our own; that they will confront and be diagnosed with diseases and ailments as well as medical treatments similar to our own, that they will grow old and that they will one day die – whether from illness, injury, accident, etc. They, like us, are vulnerable and mortal. Life for them is, as for us, arbitrary, unpredictable and full of loss, grief and adversity. We are friends, teachers and guides to them as they are to us.

From our animal companions we learn much about growing old, for their aging process mirrors and mimics our own. We observe them as they become less active and robust; as they become less alert and attentive; as they lose interest in the food they relished and the toys and games in which they delighted. Their muzzles become grey or white; their gaze becomes dim; their hearing is less acute; they spend most of their time sleeping; they may be immobile and/or incontinent. They isolate and withdraw from us...In so many ways, they are like aging humans...

When our beloved pets have been diagnosed with a terminal illness such as cancer or HIV; when they are in great pain and obviously suffering; when they are not mobile and are incontinent; when they stop eating and drinking; when it is obvious that they are no longer experiencing a significant quality of life, we are faced with several options. One is to simply wait for them to die on their own, “naturally” and let their suffering continue living. The other is to help put a merciful end to their suffering by having them euthanized. Euthanasia is the Greek term meaning “good death”, and it is administered by a trusted veterinarian -presumably one that has known you and your pet and provided treatment and advice over the years. The procedure is quick and virtually painless. However, the decision to have a pet euthanized is one of the most difficult and complex decisions we may ever make. It is also one of the least selfish, most compassionate and humane decisions we will make. We have done everything in our power to help our pets – provided loving care, medical attention, special diets, holistic and homeopathic remedies in addition to traditional medical procedures – and yet we have not been able to improve the quality of life for our beloved family member. Before making the decision to euthanize our pet, it is wise to research the subject and reflect upon our own spiritual/religious and philosophical orientation as well as what other religions and philosophies teach.

When it is painfully obvious that our beloved pet is dying, we experience many profound emotions: fear, overwhelming sadness and depression, intense loneliness, anger, frustration, self-pity, anguish, despair, guilt, and helplessness. When our pet dies, we are overcome by even more raw, powerful and painful emotions. Our lives are turned upside down; our daily routines and patterns are disrupted; our plans for the future are shattered; there is a deep and painful void in our hearts and lives. We dearly miss our loved one. Our hearts have been broken by the loss of our gentle, unceasingly loving and loyal best friend. Initially, we may experience shock and denial, i.e. "I can't believe Jasmine is dead." "It isn't possible that she's not coming back." We may cry uncontrollably; scream in anger and frustration; withdraw and isolate from our friends and family members, lose interest in our jobs and in life itself. We may find ourselves unable to focus or concentrate on the simplest of tasks.. We may feel betrayed by and anger toward God – along with bitterness and resentment. Our hearts ache and we yearn to once again hug and hold our loved one, the one loyal, unconditionally loving and forgiving, trusted and true being who was pure of heart. We may not understand the depth and range of these intense emotions, but the fact is we are grieving!

As a society, most of us are taught little about grief –what it is and how to identify it, articulate it and cope with and recover from it. We are taught not to openly discuss our feelings about the loss of humans let alone an animal. We are advised to "Keep a stiff upper lip", "Be strong", "Get over it", "Move on," "Don't burden others with your troubles", "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps". Our friends may be well-intentioned but are awkward and unschooled in the effort to comfort and console us. We, in turn, are ashamed, uncomfortable and embarrassed to acknowledge, let alone openly discuss our grief over the loss of a pet, and so we internalize our feelings even though our hearts may have been broken and the way to begin to recover from grief is to express our feelings openly and forthrightly.

And while it is acceptable and beneficial to mourn the death of a human being, to hold public as well as private funeral or memorial services, wakes and other ceremonies and burials and to eulogize our loved one and to receive sympathy and condolences from our friends, traditionally there have been few, if any of these public ceremonies or rituals available and acceptable which help comfort us and help us recover from our grief over the loss of a pet. However, it should be noted that this situation is changing dramatically as our pets' status and importance in our lives have increased and the public's consciousness regarding the importance of pets in our lives becomes increasingly elevated. Pet funerals, wakes, memorials, tributes and eulogies – even candle light vigils – have become much more common. With increasing frequency, we hold ceremonial burials and services for our pets. We may bury them in our gardens, family burial plots, at pet cemeteries. We may purchase a casket and headstone. We may choose to have them cremated and have their remains placed in an urn. We may choose to have their cremated remains buried in a special place or spread with our own remains at a sacred spot of special emotional or spiritual significance. We choose or design beautiful burial markers and graves; as beloved and cherished family members, their burial is sacred. We may mourn the passing of our beloved pet alone or with family members and friends who knew and loved our animal companion.

We honor, celebrate and memorialize the lives of our loved ones. We make financial endowments in their memory and honor; we donate to our favorite animal welfare organizations on their behalf; we pay for the rescue and care of abandoned, neglected and abused animals. We donate trees, shrubs, park benches, memorial bricks, etc. to honor and memorialize our departed pets. We may adopt other pets in their honor, for there are so many abandoned, neglected and abused animals in need of loving homes.

When we grieve, we experience a confluence of painful feelings and emotions, but it is important to understand that no two people grieve in the same way. For example, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, renowned M.D., author and pioneer researcher in the field of death and dying has delineated the 5 phases of bereavement when one is diagnosed with a terminal illness as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These do not necessarily apply to grief over the loss of a pet or another human being. We may experience one or more of these phases, but we may feel a vast spectrum of emotions including loneliness, emptiness, abandonment, helplessness, hopelessness, anger, guilt, depression and despair, rage and bitterness, etc. There is no prescribed or designated way to grieve; there is no allotted or “normal” time frame in which to grieve. Each of us is unique; the relationship that we had with the loved one was special. The most important aspects of recovering from grief are to know that it is the normal, natural and healthy response to loss and that it is cumulative. In other words, the intensity of the grief we experience over the loss of a loved pet may depend on how many previous losses we have sustained and the emotional and spiritual significance of these losses.

It is important to recognize that we are grieving and to give expression to our true feelings whether through conversations with loving, supportive and empathetic friends and colleagues. It may be helpful to consult with members of the clergy and various staff members of local animal welfare organizations or rescue groups who understand and have themselves experienced the loss of an animal companion. We may wish to contact a psychologist or grief counselor and participate in pet grief support groups. In addition, there are many wonderful books and internet web sites which offer invaluable information on the subject of pet loss, pet death and grief.

Many of us experience profound sadness and loss when our pet dies. We love them and accept them as family member, and once they are gone, the pain of their absence, the void they leave in our lives are immeasurable. We mourn their loss and wish to honor, celebrate and memorialize their lives as we would do with anyone we dearly love. It is becoming increasingly popular to arrange for the death of our pets – we may purchase a burial plot, casket and headstone; we bring flowers to their gravesite; we hold funerals and even candle light vigils for our pets.

In a world full of chaos and confusion, isolation and loneliness, our animal companions bring love to our hearts and joy to our lives. They link us with the world of nature and help us to find peace. It is not surprising that they have become such a vital and integral part of our lives and that we seek to reciprocate and repay their loyalty, beauty, nobility,

forgiveness and unconditional love by indulging them during life and honoring and memorializing them upon their death...

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Dr. Pomerance counsels those grieving from any loss; however she has a special interest in helping those mourning the loss of a beloved companion animal. The loss of a pet can be devastating to adults as well as children.

Dr. Pomerance created, established and is director of the SPCA Pet Grief Counseling Program. She is internationally regarded as an “animal expert” and has appeared on countless television and radio programs and has been interviewed in newspapers and magazines in the U.S. and Canada. She is the author of numerous articles as well as the highly acclaimed children’s books, WHEN YOUR PET DIES, ANIMAL COMPANIONS: YOUR FRIENDS, TEACHERS & GUIDES, ANIMAL COMPANIONS: IN OUR HEARTS, OUR LIVES & OUR WORLD and for adults and young adults, ANIMAL ELDERS: CARING ABOUT OUR AGING ANIMAL COMPANIONS and her most recent book, FINDING PEACE AFTER THE LOSS OF A LOVED ANIMAL COMPANION. FINDING PEACE is a spiritual resource and practical guide to recovering not only from the loss of a beloved pet but any loss. It is available through Dr. Pomerance’s web site: www.animalcompanionsandtheirpeople.com as well as amazon.com and at bookstores.