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When Love Hurts

We who choose to surround ourselves with lives even more temporary than our own live within a fragile circle, easily and often breached. Unable to accept its awful gaps, we still would live no other way.

—Irving Townsend

Sometimes there is nothing we can do; their body wears out, or they run off, fly away, get hurt, or are kidnapped. We ourselves may get old, sick, or disabled. We outlive most of the companion animals who grace our lives. Consequently, at some point, for some reason, we must face an inevitable reality and figure out how to cope with the loss of a beloved companion animal, whose relationship has meant so much.

Our society is not comfortable with death. We avoid talking or thinking about it, as if that avoidance will bestow immunity. Until death is forced upon us, we try to pretend that it is not a part of life, ignoring the fact that none of us gets out alive. Authors John James and Frank Cherry, in their book *The Grief Recovery Handbook*¹ discuss the irony that we are taught first aid as early as grade school, and everyone knows to dial 911 in case of an emergency, but we are never taught how to grieve or support those left behind by the more than 2 million people who die each year.²

Experts from various pertinent fields now realize that people experience the same symptoms of grief when their companion animal dies as they do when a close family member or friend dies—sometimes even more. And why not? Companion animals are considered family members with distinct roles, most of which are related to emotional and social support. Consequently, they are sorely missed when they die or disappear, and their deaths cause great grief.

The depth of the grief is directly related to the meaning the animal had in our life. Grief reactions may vary widely, even within a family, depending on the animal's age, the magnitude of the relationship, and how the animal died or disappeared. "The death or loss of a beloved pet can be a life-changing event. Because of the immense contribution [of the relationships], the death, loss or theft of a beloved animal results in the end of a special relationship and can be

one of the most difficult times in a person's life. The impact will vary . . . across a wide continuum of response patterns."³

This is the time when the critical nature of the relationships we have with companion animals becomes most salient because the grief and the associated emotions are real, and we suffer deeply. Yet, this is the time when people with companion animals are most alone. Although the grief is "legitimate and justified,"⁴ our culture provides no acceptable way to grieve on these occasions. Our feelings are frequently trivialized by our friends, our extended family, and therapists. Everyone understands how difficult it is to cope when a person you love dies, but when an animal you love dies, few people understand. Even veterinarians, to whom we might naturally turn, often underestimate the enormity of the grief. Consequently, we are reluctant to share our grief for fear of being criticized or rejected.

Those of us who choose to share our lives with companion animals are likely to experience this grief several times, but that does not make it easier. As an adult, I have twice endured the death of a dog, and the circumstances were so different that I cannot draw any conclusions about what I will experience the next time. The experience for the loss of each animal was different, based on the particulars of the relationship and the quality of my life at the time. I *can* say that coping with the grief is easier when you are surrounded by people who genuinely understand how you feel and allow you to experience the grief as fully as you require without ridicule or embarrassment. People who do not give that permission risk disrupting the balance of their relationships with the bereaved, positioning everyone for damage that exacerbates the grief and could create tension in future social interactions.

As a society, we are beginning to comprehend the significance of companion animals in human lives. Now, we must realize the impact of that significance when the animal dies or the relationship is terminated for other reasons, and we must give people our consent to grieve openly and completely, in order to effectively circumvent widespread emotional problems and to promote healing.

TYPES OF LOSS

We may *lose* our companion animals in a mind-numbing variety of ways, with death being the most prevalent. In this chapter, I avoid using the word "lose" as a euphemism for death. Rather, I use the words "lose" or "loss" to refer to the collective possibilities that result in death or other separation. For example, our companion animals may run away, mysteriously disappear, or get abducted. Death, itself, typically is caused by old age, illness, or accident. We may experience symptoms of loss when we relinquish our companion animals to a shelter or foster care, especially if we do so because we feel overwhelmed by personal or financial instability. We may also lose rights to keep our companion animals in a custody battle or become infirmed from either an acute or chronic illness and become unable to care for them. The point is anything *can* happen. As is the case with

the humans we love, there is no end to the types of tragedies that can take our companion animals away from us. There is, however, a significant type of death from which we are spared with our human loved ones—euthanasia, which is such an agonizing aspect of our relationships with companion animals that I discuss it separately.

Grief experts have classified loss into four categories: primary, secondary, ambiguous, and symbolic. Death, of course, is a primary loss. Where companion animals are concerned, an example of a secondary loss is when a working dog, who is also a companion, dies. In that kind of situation, beyond the primary loss of the animal's death, the work the animal was performing is considered a secondary loss. Ambiguous losses leave unanswered questions or unfinished business in the minds of the survivors. Companion animals who are lost, stolen, run away, or die from unknown causes are examples of ambiguous losses. Symbolic losses are losses that are compounded by being linked to other aspects of a person's life, such as when a dog is shared with a deceased spouse.⁵

Euthanasia

Most of us hope that we and those we love will die peacefully during sleep. The American judicial system does not allow us to choose euthanasia for human family members who are suffering, but we are not so fortunate when it comes to our companion animals. Euthanasia is probably the most common and agonizing decision that animal guardians have to make, and it is a decision that guardians know likely awaits them. As our animals become frail or their bodies fail because of accidents or trauma, we are frequently put in a position of having to choose life or death for them—it is a gut-wrenching decision. Although the decision is always traumatic, it is “demanded by humanitarian obligation, when it provides necessary relief by ending terminal suffering and poor quality of life.”⁶ Euthanasia is a complicated issue, which leaves most guardians with some level of guilt and doubt. I have faced the decision once in my life, so far, and I still feel guilty that I gave up too soon. After nearly twenty years, I realize the guilt, which will surely influence future similar decisions, is something I may carry forever. Because choosing death for an animal for whom we have cared and protected is contrary to our beliefs and behaviors, we try to distance ourselves from feeling complicit in the death by using euphemisms such as “putting the animal to sleep.” The cognitive dissonance that we experience is often mediated by knowing that we have often committed an act of love, actually protecting them to the end of the relationship. Our final act is to protect them from a painful, prolonged death.

Undoubtedly, some people elect euthanasia as a convenient, “hasty dispatch of a sick or injured animal.” Perhaps, they cannot cope with the excruciating pain of watching the animal die, or parents may want to spare their children the experience of witnessing the death. Parents may be imparting the wrong lesson in the latter case because euthanasia under certain circumstances can teach children

that animals are expendable, “especially when [maintaining the animal] becomes expensive or difficult.”⁷

A decision to euthanize, especially in response to a chronic or terminal illness, must be carefully considered and discussed with a trusted veterinarian who is familiar with you, your companion animal, and your history together. Typically, the way a veterinarian communicates a prognosis will give the guardian an indication whether or not to consider euthanasia. Bond-centered veterinarians are sensitive to the profound nature of the decision and prepare the guardians as much as possible. There are no real guidelines about when *enough is enough* because no one knows your companion animal better than you. Deb Acord, a reporter for the *Colorado Gazette*, who wrote a poignant account of the final days of her dog Waldo, was given the following advice for when to consider euthanasia: “When he quits being Waldo, doing all the things that make him Waldo, you’ll know it’s time.”⁸

Clinically oriented suggestions include the following “red flags” for unrelenting pain, which is often a deciding factor in euthanasia:

- Refusal to eat for more than twelve hours
- Reluctance to move
- Crying
- Whining or whimpering
- Inability to achieve a comfortable position
- Behavioral changes
- Aggression
- Panting while at rest
- Shaking or shivering.⁹

The traditional operating procedure for veterinarians where euthanasia was concerned was to minimize their human clients’ exposure to the procedure. There was not much discussion or explanation; the guardian typically turned the animal over to the veterinarian and returned later for the remains or cremains (remains after a cremation). Things have changed, and veterinarians typically discuss the procedure in detail and invite guardians to be present if they choose.

Large animals, such as horses, can present an exception. Veterinarian Julia Brannan made a statement that succinctly described the poignant difference between euthanizing a large companion animal rather than a small one: “A horse is a large magnificent animal and it is going to drop to the ground.”¹⁰ Barbaro immediately came to mind. He was not a companion horse, but he stole the heart of America as we watched in hopeful anticipation that he would overcome the shattered leg he suffered during the Preakness Stakes in May 2006. As we witnessed this horse’s unfortunate course end in euthanasia, we gained a better understanding of what it is to love and lose one of these majestic creatures. The emotional impact of losing a large beloved animal may be magnified by the loss of their large physical presence in your life. Witnessing the end of a life force of

that magnitude may be too excruciating for the guardian, and best reserved for the veterinarian.

Whether a large or small animal is involved, if veterinarians are concerned that the guardian cannot cope well with being present during the euthanasia, potentially increasing the anxiety of the animal or interfering with the procedure, they will discourage involvement.

I have never witnessed euthanasia, but from all I have read, it is not pretty. Death occurs in a matter of seconds after the lethal injection is given, but the body may twitch and excrete fluids. The procedure is not easy for anyone, including the veterinarian, some of whom are concerned about becoming emotional in the presence of their clients. I dare say that, most guardians will understand and welcome a show of emotion from their veterinarian, who is a part of a veterinary health care team that has cared for a companion animal in a bond-centered practice. Professional veterinary organizations such as the American Animal Hospital Association now counsel veterinarians on how to prepare themselves, their team, and their human and animal clients for the procedure, including care and support for all parties when it is over. Veterinarians are encouraged to provide information on grief itself, the need for grief counseling, the importance of creating memorials, and the warning signs for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

In small ways each day over the course of our relationships with companion animals, we decide whether they will live or die by how we care for them. Consequently, we are obligated to them to accept responsibility for this ultimate life and death decision. The obligation then turns to ourselves, to insure that we understand grief and bereavement—no matter which kind of loss caused it.

GRIEF AND ITS COMPONENTS DEFINED

According to the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, grief is “an emotional response to the loss of a loved or otherwise significant person, usually following a death.” The said that a debate exists in scientific literature about the kinds of situations to which grief can be applied. Nonetheless, I was surprised that the death of companion animals was not included until I read further in the entry that the loss of siblings was only “more recently” considered an acceptable “occasion” for grief. This is a tough crowd. The encyclopedia also did not include companion animals in a list of situations that might cause “grief-like reactions,” such as the loss of “homeland, livelihood, or job, loss of physical function through illness or accident.”¹¹ I located other references, more to my liking, which state for example: “the loss or death of a cherished pet creates a grief reaction that is in many ways comparable to that of the loss of a [human] family member.”¹² Better yet, another author asserts that “loss of a companion animal . . . is an unqualified occasion for bereavement.”¹³

Bereavement was described in the psychology dictionary as a condition applied to those who have lost a “loved one through death.” I have established sufficiently

that our companion animals are our loved ones, and I agree with the author who writes the following: “It is clear that the behavior of pet owners at the time of their animals’ death appears to mimic in many ways the stages or phases that have been described as characteristic of bereavement after human death.”¹⁴

Mourning was distinguished as the “social expressions of grief during bereavement,” and includes funerals and other ceremonies, with the caveat that some people consider them synonymous.¹⁵ I agree. Consequently, I will consider a person in grief as bereaved or in mourning, and will use the terms interchangeably. Remember, I am not using the term *loss* as a euphemism for death, but I will use the word *missing* when talking about an animal who has been kidnapped, stolen, or run away. I maintain that regardless of how it happens, the feeling is the same because an absence is an absence. Some types of loss have added potential for guilt as you will read, but I submit that all bereaved guardians experience some guilt as a component of grief.

Much of the literature tends to marginalize or assign pathology to the grief associated with companion animals, assuming that the relationships are inferior and that the grief is insignificant.¹⁶ Yet, what is happening to people is not insignificant, and this is not new knowledge. For instance, a retrospective data analysis of bereaved guardians whom veterinarians had referred to a social worker in 1980, showed that 93 percent of participants reported that the animal’s death disrupted their daily routine, including causing problems with sleep and appetite. Fifty-one percent said they chose to avoid social activities, preferring to spend time alone at home, talking very little with anyone. Forty-one percent missed between one and three days of work, took sick or vacation days, and experienced problems at work. Only one person in the entire data analysis did not experience any problems.¹⁷ Other studies concur, providing reports of emotional problems following a loss, such as decreased motivation, stress, intense depression, thoughts of self-harm, anxiety, and worry.¹⁸

Grief is as inevitable as death, but even the guardian is often caught unawares. Scientific literature and the popular press are filled with reports and examples of people who had no idea that their companion animal’s death would have such an impact. In some cases, they report that the veterinarian had provided details about the animal’s illness, the euthanasia procedure, and options for disposing of the body, but had not said a word about the grief and bereavement that would follow.

Death and the resulting grief are the most common of all human experiences—“normal and spontaneous responses to loss.” Grief is a process that is “necessary for healing the emotional wounds caused by a loss.”¹⁹ Because it is a process, not an event, it is not always clear when it begins and when, if ever, it ends. Unfortunately, given how our society operates, people have to find their own way. In the absence of education about the process, the least we can do is allow the process to unfold naturally for others and ourselves. Suppressed feelings are simply that—suppressed—poised for inevitable eruptions or leaking out in unaccepted, psychologically damaging ways.

Before I close this section, I want to point out that surviving animals in multi-animal homes may also experience grief, though not as will be described in the next sections. However, animals who live together become attached to each other, recognize when one is missing or dead, and may respond. They may become restless or depressed and experience changes in eating and sleeping behaviors. Give them time to heal, too, but if the problems persist talk to your veterinarian. Do not establish unhealthy dependence or attachment behavior in an attempt to soothe their grief, and try to keep a regular schedule for the surviving animals. Immediately after a death or loss is not the time to incorporate a new companion into the house. The surviving animals will not be fooled by attempts at replacing their friends, and you may be postponing your own grief response.

Disenfranchised Grief

Experts distinguish grief based on severity of symptoms over certain time-frames. I have chosen three types of grief that bereaved guardians of companion animals experience most often: Disenfranchised grief, Anticipatory grief, and Complicated grief. One universal fact I discovered is that following the death of a companion animal, most people suffer in silence, alienated from friends and family and reluctant to seek help. This is described as *disenfranchised grief* because the bereaved are *deprived* of the understanding and compassion of other people. Women who experience miscarriages, especially early in their pregnancies, frequently experience this type of grief. Many times their friends and family were not aware of the pregnancy, and the women grieve their unborn children in silence; frequently not able to share their feelings of profound loss even with their husbands. This example is meant not to equate the losses by any means, but to give an example of disenfranchised grief that is easy to comprehend. The term was introduced by Kenneth J. Doka as grief that is “not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.” He also said that disenfranchised grief has three possible triggers: (1) The relationship with the deceased is not recognized; (2) the loss is not recognized; or (3) the griever is not recognized. I believe that all grief associated with the loss of a companion animal is compounded by an element of disenfranchised grief.²⁰

Why Is It So Hard to Help?

Death is a paralyzing enigma. Most of us are afraid of death completely; we are uncomfortable around the dying and people who have had recent death in their family. We do not know what to say, and we feel awkward and stupid. We realize that nothing short of bringing back the dead will offer any solace. So we tend to avoid the grief-stricken and let them work it out until their pain is not so palpable, because we cannot bear to witness the suffering. Our society has established customs of acceptable behavior when a human dies and we get through them because we know what is expected of us, and the consequences of

not participating in those customs. However, our society has no accepted way to grieve for the death of a companion animal.

Betty Carmack, a registered nurse and counselor, who has facilitated a monthly pet loss support group at the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Companion Animals, spoke of a client whose eleven-year-old shepherd-collie mix, Chloe, died after a long illness. She counseled the guardian, suggesting many ways to deal with the immediate grief. In particular, she encouraged her to leave home and stay with friends when the grief was overwhelming. "If this was an eleven-year-old child, no one would expect you to be alone, she explained. They would come over to your house or invite you to theirs."²¹

When companion animals die, people really do not know what to do. The deaths are "not recognized consistently by friends, acquaintances, or colleagues as a significant or authentic occasion for bereavement."²² Companion animal guardians suffer what can be one of the most traumatic experiences of their lives, and often cope with little compassion and understanding from others. People who grieve the death of their companion animal are frequently subjected to ridicule, disbelief, curt statements, and rude behavior from people who are supposed to be their primary support system, as well as from those in their extended social circles. People make callous remarks either directly to or about the grief-stricken, such as "It's just a cat" or "It's been two weeks, isn't she over it?" Faced with this kind of insensitivity, bereaved guardians keep to themselves.

Carmack reasons that the people who diminish the grief after the death of companion animals likely never had a companion animal. I find that hard to accept, given the number of animal lovers in the world. I suspect the callous behavior has more to do with our generalized discomfort with death and a widespread absence of appropriate sensibilities about animals.

Whatever is the cause of the callous treatment, the result can be damaging to the bereaved because the "lack of social and professional sanction for the bereavement of a pet's loss can complicate or derail grief and adaptive coping." Unexpressed grief of any kind can manifest into chronic headaches, anxiety, fear, sleep disorders, digestive disturbances, dysfunctional relationships, loss of communication, and inability to focus.²³

Anticipatory Grief

Scholars are not in agreement about how to identify or classify anticipatory grief or whether it even exists, but I believe it is a phenomena—one that applies to relationships between humans and their companion animals.

According to the National Cancer Institute's Web site, anticipatory grief occurs in anticipation of an impending loss. Where human relationships are concerned, anticipatory grief can provide family members with time to gradually absorb the reality of the approaching death and complete unfinished business. Nonetheless, anticipating a death and experiencing anticipatory grief does not necessarily reduce the amount of grief suffered when the death actually happens,

but there is an element of being able to prepare. Where human–human relationships are concerned, *both* the dying and in those close to them can experience anticipatory grief. Although anticipatory grief is typically applied after a terminal illness is diagnosed, I maintain that people with companion animals stay, because of the animals' short lifespans, in a state of anticipation and wariness that the death is looming, and the pain is forthcoming. How could we not? Many popular companion animals have lifespans of ten years or less. Guardians are aware that a comparatively early death is inevitable, but the sadness and depression associated with anticipatory grief do not manifest until and unless the animal receives a terminal diagnosis or becomes aged. The reality of their short lifespans always hovers in the background. How we cope with that reality depends on our coping strategies in general, I presume. Some people refuse to get companion animals because they cannot cope with the inevitable *premature* loss. Others, after one shocking experience, simply never put themselves in that position again by never having another companion animal. Still others, take the bitter with the sweet, if you will, forging ahead, one animal after another, not deterred by the pain, as the quote at the beginning of the chapter suggests. The latter are the majority. We are compelled by the benefits and privileges of the relationships to face the grief. Yet, I have never talked to a person who did not, if even for a moment, agonize over what was to come.

Complicated Grief

As the name implies, the nature of this grief is often complicated by circumstances surrounding the grief. As a consequence, the immediate response to the loss is exceptionally devastating and the passage of time does not moderate the emotional pain or restore competent functioning.²⁴ Symptoms of complicated grief resemble those of post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁵ This is especially true for people who have witnessed the traumatic death of a companion animal. People with service animals who die and for whom the death may represent a loss of freedom, mobility, security, and self-esteem are also at risk for complicated grief. "Many report the brutalizing experience of becoming deaf, blind, or handicapped all over again!"²⁶ In fact, where service animals are concerned, all aspects of the death seem primary because death or loss of the animal can cause complete upheaval under these complicated circumstances. Another typical person at risk for complicated grief is one whose animal was the final link to a deceased loved one, especially a spouse or deceased child. Consider that 75 percent of 900 dog and cat guardians reported that their companion animal's death "revived memories of past bereavements, both human and animal," and they expressed a need for professional bereavement support.²⁷

Several other situations, as shown below, can contribute to complicated grief:

- No previous experience with significant loss, death, or grief
- Recent losses

- A history of losses
- Little or no support from friends
- Poor personal coping skills
- An unexplained disappearance
- Deaths that occur in conjunction with other significant life events
- Sudden, untimely, or mysterious deaths
- Feelings of guilt or responsibility for death²⁸

Scholars believe that “most people in Western society carry some remnants of” complicated grief, manifested as unresolved grief, a specific form of complicated grief that occurs when people never actively process the emotional fallout of grief, letting it build with subsequent events. People with this type of complicated grief may make “elaborate arrangements” to avoid reminders of the death, such as driving out of their way not to pass a park, veterinarian’s office, or room in their house that reminds them of their dead companion animal. When grief goes unattended, pathological grief may result where the most tragic outcome is suicide. Veterinarians are not expected to be equipped to deal with these intense manifestations of grief, but they can remain vigilant and proactive in making referrals to mental health professionals. Complicated or not, grief will not go away on its own. It must be confronted and normalized to enable the bereaved to function in spite of the loss.

Our society could benefit from accepted approaches to death, the dying, and the bereaved that are more frank. Bereaved animal guardians, in particular, would benefit from more societal acceptance, support, and compassion.

Occasionally, the death of a companion animal is felt so profoundly by a community that its residents seem to coalesce around the bereaved to offer support, creating unique memorials or employing established human traditions to memorialize the fallen. This is what happened in the following two examples. First, I am honored to introduce you to Foxy, a ten-year-old white American pit bull terrier whose relationship with her homeless guardian Ralph Vargas of Hoboken, New Jersey, “was a testimony to the companionship between man and dog.” The inseparable pair were fixtures on Hudson Street, where passersby gladly gave donations toward their care. Vargas, who had rescued Foxy from an abusive situation, was a devoted guardian for many years, who dressed Foxy in layers to keep her warm on the streets during inclement weather. “It wasn’t the perfect situation for a dog, but it was for her because she had him,” said an animal rescue volunteer familiar with the pair. One Monday morning the community was stunned and saddened to learn that Foxy had been killed by a hit-and-run driver of a pickup truck as she ran, uncharacteristically, across the street ahead of Vargas to greet a friend. Vargas carried her three blocks to the Hoboken Animal Medical Hospital, but Foxy’s internal injuries were too severe, and her heart stopped beating. The community realized the impact of Foxy’s loss on Vargas and rallied around him during his time of intense grief. They knew Foxy as a gentle, sweet dog who was completely devoted to a man who worried about her more than he did himself.

Foxy, the belle of Hoboken, NJ, and the companion of a homeless man, Ralph Vargas, was killed by a hit-and-run driver. © 2007 Diana Pappas, used with permission.



A freelance photographer had happened to take a photograph of Foxy just days before the accident that allowed “one of Hoboken’s most well-liked dogs,” to be remembered in the local paper. Companion Animal Placement, a local rescue organization, had routinely paid for Foxy’s shots, medicines, city licenses, and her board fee at the animal hospital on especially bitter winter nights. They also collected funds to pay for her cremation and created a pendant with a few of Foxy’s ashes that Vargas can wear around his neck.²⁹

K-9 Sirius, a member of the Port Authority Police Department, was the only dog who died at the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001, in New York City. Sirius, whose primary duty was checking trucks and unattended bags for bombs, had lived with his partner, David Lim. He had left her behind in a kennel, thinking she would be safer there while he responded to what he thought was a bomb explosion in the building. He remembers telling her, “One must have gotten by us. I’ll be back to get you.” Lim guided hundreds of people to safety and was trapped himself for five hours, but the collapse of the towers made it impossible to keep his vow to Sirius. When the dog’s remains were found four months after the attacks, all work ceased at ground zero for Sirius’ body to be brought out in ceremonial fashion, just like the other fallen heroes. Later, two-hundred-and-fifty officers from Port Authority, the New York Police Department, and as far away as Chicago, attended a memorial ceremony to honor Sirius. One at a time, one-hundred handlers with their dogs stepped up to the dais to salute a portrait of Sirius and honor her remains. Each officer knew what Lim was

going through. One said, “It’s the same kind of loss as when you lose a [human] partner.” An FBI agent presented Lim with Sirius’ water bowl, which had been later recovered from the debris. Lim said, “To many people, this would be just a water bowl, but this is something I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.”³⁰

PROCESSING GRIEF

Although we process our grief in very individualized ways, several theories provide insight into what is happening during grief and suggest ways to cope with the pain. The most widely known and accepted theory was introduced by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, who identified the following five stages of grief:

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance.

In this model, people must go through four stages of grief before reaching the fifth, normalized stage of acceptance. The stages are not necessarily sequential, may not all occur, and are open ended.

I find the task-based models more appealing because they are proactive and give the bereaved some element of control over events rather than waiting for stages or phases to pass. For example, J. W. Worden refers to four tasks of mourning that *must be dealt with*, which are easily applied to grieving guardians of companion animals. The first task requires that the bereaved *accept the reality of the loss*. This may be particularly difficult in cases of accident or sudden death from illness, as the guardian must come to grips with the fact that the animal is gone, and routines associated with the relationship are terminated abruptly. The second task in Worden’s model is to *experience the pain*—a primary component of grief that cannot be avoided, no matter how overwhelming it may feel. Continuous attempts to deny the pain or distract from it will cause unresolved or complicated grief. The third task requires the bereaved to *adjust to an environment without the object of grief*. For example, this task might require the bereaved to become accustomed to coming home to an empty house, not hiking in the woods with a dog on weekends, or no longer participating in agility trials or cat shows. Adjusting to the loss of tangible and intangible roles fulfilled by the companion animal can be the most emotionally difficult task, but also perhaps the most pivotal, preparing you for the fourth and final task: *invest emotional energy into a new life*. Many guardians feel that success in this final step is a betrayal to the memory of the animal for which they grieve because they are basically being asked to “move on” emotionally. They fear they will forget the beloved animal. However, in this model, the bereaved are urged to keep pictures and other keepsakes that will sustain memories.³¹

This is not a self-help book, and I urge anyone experiencing grief from the death or disappearance of a beloved companion animal to seek help from a mental health professional, one who specializes in grief, and *pet grief* specifically, if possible. A myriad of resources are available on the Internet or from your veterinarian, and membership organizations for mental health professionals may be helpful.

Many bereaved guardians turn to specialized support groups and hotlines where they know they will find like-minded people who know what they are going through and are aware of appropriate professional resources in their vicinity. Thanks to pioneers like Enid Traisman, support groups for bereaved animal guardians are plentiful. In 1986, she founded the second support group in the country for bereaved guardians—to the ridicule of her friends and family, and veterinarians who refused to participate. “People weren’t sensitive about the issue,” she said. To get started, Traisman, a social worker with experience in neonatology, offered to lead a free support group at Dove Lewis Emergency Animal Hospital in Portland, Oregon. After twelve years as a volunteer, she became director for pet-loss support services at the hospital and is now a recognized national expert, who gives workshops and lectures across the United States. People attend her meetings distraught over a variety of animals. For example, one lady was “an absolute wreck” over a deceased bearded dragon that had been so much a part of her life that she included the reptile in her wedding. Traisman says that sometimes people are reluctant to admit how broken up they are, and some are taken by surprise. “Our dog died on Sunday,” a participant explained to Traisman. “I am at a very intense stage of grief. If someone had told me that I’d feel such pain, I wouldn’t have believed it.” Other people reported being unable to work and feeling ostracized. “Although it’s getting better, there is still less permission in society to grieve over a pet,” Traisman said. Her groups are an oasis of comfort and understanding. “You can come here and cry. You can come here and people will love to hear every detail about your companion animal,” she reminds her group.³²

Companion Animal Related Emotions (CARE), is an example of a confidential telephone helpline. It is staffed by veterinary students from the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine, who have been trained by professional grief counselors and are supervised by a licensed clinical social worker.³³

The following suggestions from Kübler-Ross’s official Web site (www.elisabethkublerross.com) can be helpful for guardians awaiting triage to appropriate resources:

- Attend support groups in your area
- Obtain therapy with a psychologist or a qualified mental health professional
- Try Journaling (writing is a catharsis for many)
- Eat well
- Exercise
- Get enough rest

- Read and learn about death-related grief responses
- Seek comforting rituals or solace in the faith community
- Allow emotions (tears can be healing)
- Avoid major changes in residence, jobs, or marital status.

No amount of knowledge can really prepare us for the personalized, intense, and persistent pain of grief. However, the above theories of grief, and others, can inform us that our experiences are normal. They help guide us through the treacherous terrain that we must navigate on our own terms and in our own time, commensurate with our needs and the depth of the loss.

BURIALS, CEREMONIES, AND MEMORIALS

When a companion animal dies we frequently want to acknowledge their lives, and we do so with the only kinds of ceremonies and rituals we know. My favorite example is of Jill Schaffer, a Christian, who *sat shiva*—a gathering, in the Jewish tradition, of family and friends to mourn a loved one and comfort the survivors—when her cat Della died. She invited friends to her home the night she returned from the crematorium, and they ate pizza and shared stories about her “big, wonderful cat.”³⁴

We also typically want a permanent, visual reminder that symbolizes the relationship, but the most immediate need is to arrange for disposition of the body in a respectful manner. Schaffer is not rare in her desire for a ceremony based on a religious tradition. Many people with spiritual and religious orientations often choose religious rites of passage for their animals that include a leader from their faith, presiding over a funeral. Glenn Lane, director of Noah’s Ark Pet Cemetery in Falls Church, Virginia (near Washington, DC), said that he has seen every type of clergy represented except a Buddhist monk. He recalls a Muslim family that included an Imam and “wanted to make sure the pet was facing east when he buried it.” Harold White, Jewish chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, says that he “wings it” with prayers that he creates, because Judaism, as is the case with other religions, has no set ceremony for animal burials. “The most important thing is to bring solace to people who have suffered a loss. I believe an animal who lived with dignity in the home should be buried with dignity.”³⁵

Guardians planning secular ceremonies seek the services of people such as India Cooke, a jazz violinist and composer with an international resume that includes performances with other artists such as Ray Charles, Frank Sinatra, and Diana Ross. She founded Angel Airs, “transitional music and ceremony” provided by caring, professional musicians. Cooke currently has four cats and is no stranger to the impact of the grief associated with a companion animal’s death. She decided to blend her love of music with the love and devotion she has for her own companions, and to celebrate with ceremony the lives of animals lost.³⁶

Burials and Cemeteries

Graveside services are the most common ceremony for deceased companion animals, with at least seventy-five companies in the United States offering bereavement or cremation-related products and services.³⁷ Many offer a complete line of urns and caskets, vaults, memorials, mausoleums, prepayment plans, and/or a furnished stateroom for viewing. They are part of the multifaceted *pet loss industry*, which includes cemeteries, crematories, grief counselors, hotlines, books, tapes, and chat rooms.

Pet cemeteries have become increasingly popular because some cities prohibit burial of animals in private yards or public property. A recent article in the *New York Times* reported that “there are more than 1,000 pet cemeteries across the United States and many provide most everything from funeral services and customized burial sites to cremation and bereavement counseling.” The article said that “the sky is the limit when it comes to options” for guardians who want to give their companions a “proper send off.” This is the case with A. R. LaMura, who has made prearrangements in the six-figure range for his dog Sandy, “a mixed-breed terrier” he found on a loading dock fifteen years prior to her being diagnosed with cancer. He has cared for the dog “as if she were his own child,” and he has created a “granite mausoleum,” a replica of his family mausoleum in a Bronx cemetery that awaits his beloved Sandy with a “copper coffin as nice as any child’s.”³⁸

Guardians choose cemeteries for companion animals for a sense of dignity and permanence, but permanence is elusive. Stories of cemeteries turned over to developers or left in disrepair are a concern to guardians. Cemeteries are unregulated in most states, leaving remains vulnerable to be moved without notice to make room for development, regardless of their historical significance or the famous animals interred. Take the case of Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park outside of Washington, DC, one of the first cemeteries in the country to allow burial of people next to their companion animals. “The problem is that the property is worth too darn much,” said Robin L. Lauver, president of the National Association of Pet Funeral Directors. “Now you have hundreds of pet cemeteries that can be sold off as building lots. And there are no laws to stop it.” The graves of 22,000 animals and about twenty people who are buried in Rosa Bonheur are at risk, and volunteers are struggling to keep the cemetery clean, while mapping and documenting the headstones and lobbying for legislation in the Maryland Assembly to preserve it. In the region of the cemetery, Virginia is the only state—and one of few nationally—with restrictions on pet cemeteries, requiring landowners to put \$12,000 in a fund to insure perpetual care. Maryland, where Rosa Bonheur is located, and the District of Columbia, have no such laws.³⁹ Guardians often find themselves embroiled in protracted and costly lawsuits to protect what they consider sacred burial grounds of their animals. For example, as of January 2005, Dorothy M. Shapiro of Potomac, Maryland had spent more than \$500,000 to protect Aspen Hill Memorial Park, an eight-acre cemetery

in Silver Spring, MD, where 40,000 animals are reportedly buried, including a Cairn terrier belonging to J. Edgar Hoover, a World War II mascot named Rags, and a dog from the popular television show of the 1930s and 1940s, *The Little Rascals*. Shapiro gave ownership to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in the 1990s for a promise that they would maintain and preserve it. When the organization relocated from Maryland to Virginia, they helped Shapiro find another party to take over, but that arrangement has not worked out. The fate of what is considered the second-oldest pet cemetery in the country is still unknown.⁴⁰

These types of problems do not stop people from assessing the need for animal burial grounds and opening other cemeteries. For instance, Jerry Groome, a retired Air Force fighter pilot with service in Vietnam, opened the St. Francis Pet Funeral and Cemetery in 1999 after working in the funeral business for more than thirty years and noticing that there were many requests from people who wanted funeral services for their companion animals, including embalming, obituaries in the paper, and visitation hours. Groome's cemetery is the only facility in North Carolina that provides "full-service funerals" for companions, and clients hail from across North Carolina, Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. Animal cemeteries require hard work, and he has tried to train apprentices, but they have not lasted long. One of the apprentices was overwhelmed by the grieving families, and left after three days. Another could not meet the physical demands of the job—dead animals are heavy, smell bad, and can be disfigured—and quit after four months. Groome perseveres, taking his responsibilities very seriously. "It's not something we should be judgmental about," he says. "If it's tragic to [guardians] and emotional to them, then it's our job as funeral directors to take care of their needs." The cemetery has nearly 5,000 grave sites, and 300 animals, primarily dogs with a smattering of ferrets, rabbits, and one horse, have been buried at a cost of between \$500 for a basic service and \$5,000 for a package that included a casket, a 100-year vault, and a graveside service.⁴¹

To meet the burgeoning need, some human cemeteries are becoming *pet friendly*, setting aside space in existing cemeteries for people's companion animals. For example, a cemetery in suburban Chicago has set aside a couple of its forty acres for guardians who want to be buried with their companion dog, cat, fish, or bird, and people inquire about two or three times a month. Since animals typically die first, they are buried about seven-and-a-half-feet deep. Then, the guardian can be buried one foot or so above them and still maintain the traditional depth for human burial. The cost of the dual plots exceeds those for humans only, which cost about \$300.⁴²

While burials are becoming more elaborate and common, cremations are really on the increase, mirroring a similar trend in human cremation. According to the Cremation Association of North America, 32 percent of people chose cremation for themselves or their family in 2005, compared with 17 percent in 1990. Comparable figures are not available for companion animal cremations, but directors of companion animal funeral homes estimate that cremations account for

Clifford Neal, proprietor of Sugarloaf Pet Gardens, in Barnesville, MD, checks arrangements for Chuckie, a six-year-old pug he will bury. © 2005, *The Washington Post*. Photo by Bill O'Leary. Reprinted with permission.



80–90 percent of arrangements.⁴³ Cremations do not eliminate burials because cremains are typically buried, if not kept at home.

When my Grace died at the veterinarian's, they offered to have her cremated, and I accepted. Grief and guilt were searing my very being, and I was desperate to find a container to house Grace's ashes. The Internet is filled with shysters and frauds who will prey on bereaved animal guardians, but I had the great fortune to stumble across Ann Cheers and her husband, Jon Terry, artisans who not only provided a remarkable product, but also sincere and heartfelt emotional and spiritual support for my early, raw grief. They allowed me to participate in the design of the container for Grace's ashes, which ended up being a customized ceramic box. Jon poured his heart into making the container for Grace. In fact, it was so labor intensive that he no longer makes them. I am fortunate that he gave me a permanent and splendid manifestation of the love I shared with a completely unique creature, and he gave me a way to honor and memorialize our relationship forever. Through Cheers Pottery in Colorado, Ann and Jon provide the kind of urns and memorials that we all want to find for our animals—one-of-a-kind, handcrafted masterpieces perfectly suited to their lives.

Not everyone's idea is so well received and some seem designed to capitalize on the bereaved. Consider J. Hall, a taxidermist, who received hate e-mails after advertising what she called "pet pillows," cushions that "featured the skin of the animal on one side" and fabric on the other. People who ordered the pillows were required to freeze their animals in a double bag to prevent freezer burn and "hair slippage," and ship the corpse by overnight delivery to prevent further deterioration.⁴⁴ Not exactly the way most people want to treat the bodies of their beloved companion animals.

Modern technology sparks some creative ideas for memorials, such as LifeGem, diamonds created from the carbon of the cremains of any loved one, including a companion animal. Dean Vanden Biesen, LifeGem's cofounder reports, "Thirty-five percent of our business comes from people wanting to memorialize their pet." Diamonds range in size from less than a quarter of a carat to almost a full carat,



Potter Ann Cheers, of Cheers Pottery in Pagosa Springs, CO, works on a customized urn. Photo courtesy of Jonathan B. Terry. Used with permission.

in prices between \$2,600 and \$12,999. Other unique ideas include VIP Fibers, which will create a throw, scarf, or other keepsake from yarn spun from your dog's fur. Then, there are companies such as Perpetual Pet, which specialize in "freeze-drying" animals, as an alternative to conventional taxidermy. This is considered gruesome to many guardians, but the company dries up to one hundred animals a year at a cost of nearly \$600 for an animal weighing up to twenty pounds.⁴⁵

WHAT CAN WE DO TO MAKE THINGS BETTER?

The first and the most important action we can take is to create a foundation of acceptance, care, and support for bereaved guardians of companion animals, so they can process their grief as the natural human experience that it is. We must recognize the emotional significance of the bond they shared and give them permission to mourn and cope with what may be one of the most profound and traumatic experiences of their lives. Because the death of a companion animal is not fully recognized as a significant loss and the bereaved are exposed to disparaging, insensitive remarks, their trauma is exacerbated. We must begin to view the relationships, not as inferior, but as having value in and of themselves and understand that the bereaved may always have some level of sadness about the loss.

The grief response is so individual that it creates a challenge to researchers and mental health professionals alike. Yet, we need more research related to the grief experienced following the death or disappearance of a companion animal, especially the latter. "The grief surrounding a missing companion animal or one found dead is significant and affects people severely. It is one area in which health care and counseling professionals will be challenged to provide comprehensive assessment and intervention."⁴⁶ From research to practice, we need the experts in the field to guide right actions and appropriate thought. Veterinarians can

take the lead by developing sensitive, bond-centered practices that attend to the medical needs of their patients (the animals) while showing compassion for the emotional needs of their clients (the human guardians). Veterinarians are in a position to recognize the valuable roles that animals play and to model behavior that demonstrates care and understanding. They can participate in and enable clinical and psychological research that feeds their own knowledge and can make their practices repositories of information for scientists and the public.

While you and I wait for breakthroughs from research and guidance from practitioners, we can take thoughtful steps, born of our humanity, to embrace those who grieve. We can use examples from our lives to guide us. For instance, as a member of a Greek social organization, I am encouraged to “lean on the shield.” That means if I need help with a personal challenge, I can count on a sorority member to honor the oath we took in front of our sorority’s shield, by offering help. Whether she understands my problem or not, she will support me in my time of need. She knows I will do the same for her. That is what we need to do for animal guardians; lean on the shield of love and compassion. We can understand grief as a manifestation of the human condition and reach out to help another person who is hurting. Each of us has lost someone or something dear to us, and we know what that kind of hollowness feels like. Whether we have a companion animal or not, we can take some of the following steps to help the bereaved:

- Offer empathy and genuine feelings
- Talk and ask openly about the current loss
- Encourage the griever to talk and engage in emotional catharsis
- Encourage the grievers to slow their lives and take time to grieve
- Be there for grievers; offer help with everyday tasks
- Lend support and simple companionship
- Acknowledge and validate grievers
- Listen; be silent
- Offer therapeutic hugs.

Things that are not helpful are offering sympathy in the form of clichés; giving advice or reinterpreting the bereaved’s beliefs; shifting conversations to yourself; scolding, lecturing, or giving pep talks; discounting the bereaved’s thoughts and feelings; or encouraging them to get another pet or medicate their pain.⁴⁷