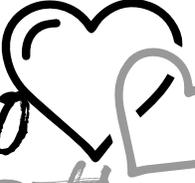
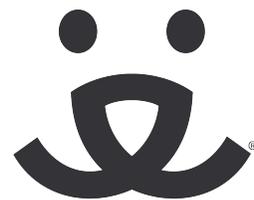


My Pet Loss Journal



Two  Hearts
Pet Loss Center



**Best
Friends®**
Save Them All®

Welcome, My Friend, to Your Pet Loss Journal

If you are here, then you have just embarked upon a journey that has rocked your world, a loss that seems unbearable to navigate. At whatever time of the year that you have picked up this Journal, you are facing a year of firsts.

The first birthday without him. The first holiday without her. The smell of spring when you finally got outside after a long, cold winter, to take those special walks.

The year of firsts.

Grief is what we feel when we experience a loss. Mourning is an essential element of healing in a grief journey. And, mourning will require work as there will be days that you don't think you can get out of bed and function to days that you count the minutes you don't cry. These minutes will turn into hours and then days through actively mourning this love that is gone.

Your Pet Loss Journal is filled with active mourning exercises. Activities that will tear at your heart in the beginning. However as the days go on, an actively mourning grieving heart will yearn for the hope of a different day. A day where the time spent together can fondly be remembered.

I'm here to walk with you, in Your Pet Loss Journal, as you face this year of firsts and record the memories.

Warmly and as a Companion for Your Journey

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Coleen". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned at the bottom center of the page.

A Pet Lover's Code

10 Inalienable Rights of a Grieving Pet Owner

1. You have the right to grieve the death of a pet. You loved your pet. Your pet loved you. You had a strong and profound relationship. You have every right to grieve this death. You need to grieve this death. You also need to mourn this death (express your grief outside yourself).
2. You have the right to talk about your grief. Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk about your grief. Other pet lovers who have experienced the death of a pet often make good listeners at this time. If at times you don't feel like talking, you also have the right to be silent.
3. You have the right to feel a variety of emotions. Confusion, anger, guilt, and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey after the death of a pet. Feelings aren't right or wrong; they just are.
4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits. After the death of a pet, your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel like doing.
5. You have the right to experience "griefbursts." Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but it is normal and natural.
6. You have the right to make use of ritual. After a pet dies, you can harness the power of ritual to help you heal. Plan a ceremony that includes everyone who loved your pet.
7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality. At times of loss, it is natural to turn to your faith or spirituality. Engaging your spirituality by attending church or other place of worship, praying, or spending time alone in nature may help you better understand and reconcile your loss.
8. You have the right to search for meaning. You may find yourself asking, "Why did my pet die? Why this way? Why now?" Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. Ask them anyway.
9. You have the right to treasure your memories. Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of a special companion animal. Instead of ignoring your memories, find ways to capture them and treasure them always.
10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal. Reconciling your grief after the death of a pet may not happen quickly. Remember, grief is best experienced in "doses." Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of a beloved pet changes your life forever.

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt

January

It's the start of a new year. Whether your grief is fresh or some time has passed, we embark upon this time of year with a renewed commitment to be healthy in all we do.

Week 1: What will you do this week for healthy mourning?

Week 2: Reflect on the New Year and what you will miss most about your pet. Light a candle in their memory.

Week 3: Scrapbooks are great tools to reflect on memories. If the thought of putting together an entire scrapbook is too much, pick out 5 photos that are the most memorable to you and reflect on the story behind each of them. Document the story with as much, or little, detail that's comfortable for you.

Week 4: Add to your scrapbook. Create a page that begins with the header "I remember the day you became a part of my family. What I remember most about that day is....." and another page with the header "If I were to describe my beloved pet as a person, he/she was this kind of a personality...."

February

February is the Month of Love. Reflect on the love you shared with your pet with these weekly activities.

Week 1: Take the word “Love” and create something out of the word in honor of your pet. This could be a song, a haiku, a video, but it’s all about your pet.

Week 2: Write a love letter to your pet. Let them know how you feel and the love you had for them.

Week 3: Take some quiet time and read the following poem:

You no longer greet me,
As I walk through the door.
You’re not there to make me smile,
To make me laugh anymore.
Life seems quiet without you,
You were far more than a pet.
You were a family member, a friend
. . . A loving soul I’ll never forget.
It will take time to heal -
For the silence to go away.
I still listen for you,
And miss you every day.
You were such a great companion,
Constant, loyal and true.
My heart will always wear,
The paw prints left by you.

Reflect on the love that you shared with your pet. What’s the first emotion that came to mind after reading this poem?

Week 4: The color red is often associated with Love. What are the colors that you associate with your pet?

March

March is considered the month of luck with St. Patrick's Day. For this month, let's focus on how lucky we are to share a relationship with our beloved pet.

Week 1: What would your pet say as to why they were lucky to have you in their life?

Week 2: What does it mean to you to be a pet parent?

Week 3: As a pet parent, what did you do to spoil your pet?

Week 4: Take some time this week to spoil yourself in a small way in honor of your pet. For instance, treat yourself to a coffee and place the name under your pet's name.

Pet Loss: Is It A Different Kind of Grief?

By Marty Tously

*"The difference between friends and pets is that friends we allow into our company, pets we allow into our solitude."
~ Robert Brault*

As one who for many years has supported bereaved animal lovers as well as people mourning the loss of human loved ones, I'm often asked how losing a pet might differ from losing a person. Is the grieving process any different, and if so, how?

Having worked as a grief counselor with both kinds of loss, and having experienced both kinds of loss myself, I can say without reservation that the grief that accompanies pet loss is no different from that of losing a cherished friend or special member of the family. As I often tell my clients, love is love, loss is loss, and pain is pain. Grief is a natural, spontaneous response to the loss of someone dearly loved. Without a doubt, the loss of a loved animal companion and the feelings associated with that loss are real, and they deserve a time of grief, mourning and healing.

While it is true that everyone grieves differently (according to their age, gender, personality, culture, value system, past experience with loss and available support) some grief reactions are fairly universal, and therefore predictable and even manageable, once we understand what is happening to us.

Although the process itself is the same, it has been my experience that bereaved animal lovers tend to work their way through their grief more quickly than those who have lost human loved ones. I think this is because the relationships we have with our beloved pets are far less complicated than those we have with human beings, and so we tend to bring less emotional "baggage" with us when we mourn the loss of a pet.

Nevertheless, there are certain differences that can make pet loss more difficult than the loss of a person.

For example, those suffering pet loss may encounter the ignorant, cruel reactions of those who trivialize their loss as insignificant: "It was just a dog (cat, horse, bird, etc.); you can always get another." For some, the insensitivity of others is more painful than grief from the actual loss. In addition, while this has changed somewhat in our culture over the last 20 years or so, pet loss is still one of those disenfranchised losses, in that it is not socially validated, publicly mourned or supported (with a funeral or wake, for example), so there may be no encouragement to acknowledge and honor the important role the animal played in a person's life, and little if any support as the bereaved animal lover comes to terms with the reality of loss.

Another significant difference is the matter of euthanasia. Deciding with a veterinarian that, for reasons of compassion and mercy, it's time to end an animal's suffering and give that animal a dignified and painless death can be one of the most difficult choices an animal lover ever has to make. For most people, taking on the responsibility to make the euthanasia decision is an awesome one that engenders massive guilt.

I firmly believe that participating in a pet loss support group is one of the most effective ways to deal with the guilt that accompanies the euthanasia decision. When the story is shared and several people affirm that, given the same set of circumstances, they would have acted the same way, it offers the one feeling guilty a powerful "group absolution" for whatever sins (real or imagined) have been committed.

My grief journey today; _____

April

April is the beginning of spring and rebirth.

Week 1: As you anticipate those ways you would like to have the freshness of spring with you, even as you honor the loss of your beloved pet, what are those emotions that you would like to have released to allow you to begin this rebirth? Symbolically release these emotions, and vow this week to make movement in your grief journey through those emotions.

Week 2: Reflect on the week you just had, a week of acknowledging emotions you're ready to release. How was your week?

Week 3: Record of re-defining:

I used to be _____. Now that _____ has died, I am _____.
This makes me feel _____.

Week 4: Coping with Pet loss

Reflect on "Am I Crazy to Feel So Sad about This" - How do you relate to what the Author is saying?

Coping with Pet Loss:

“Am I Crazy to Feel So Sad about This?”

By Marty Tousley

You’ve just learned that your family’s beloved pet is terminally ill. The vet gives your cherished companion less than a month to live! As the sad reality of losing this important member of your family sets in, a million thoughts race through your head.

Whether struggling with an animal companion’s chronic illness, facing a decision about euthanasia, or mourning the loss of a cherished pet, most animal lovers are shocked and overwhelmed by the intensity of their reactions. They wonder if it is normal to feel the loss of a companion animal so deeply. Statements such as “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I didn’t feel this bad when my grandmother (acquaintance, friend, relative) died” are common. If this is a family’s first encounter with death, parents may be uncertain how to guide their children through the experience of losing a beloved pet.

As a bereavement counselor specializing in pet loss, over the last ten years I’ve counseled numerous grieving animal lovers, both individually and in groups. I find that the questions I’m asked most frequently are these:

- Am I crazy to feel so sad (angry, guilty, depressed) about this?
- How do I cope with my feelings when my pet is lost or missing?
- Why didn’t I feel this bad when one of my relatives or friends died?
- How can I help my child(ren) deal with the loss of a pet?
- How can I deal with the insensitive comments of others (“It was just an animal” or “You can always get another”)?
- Do other animals in the household grieve? How can I help them?
- When there is no hope for recovery from illness or injury, should I choose euthanasia for my pet and, if so, how will I know when it’s time?
- Should I be present during my pet’s euthanasia?
- Do animals have souls, and do they go to Heaven? Will we be reunited someday?
- What should I do with my pet’s remains after death?
- What can I do to memorialize my pet?
- Will I feel better if I get another pet right away?
- How long does grief last, and how long should I expect to feel this way?
- Should I be getting help with my grief, and what support is available to me?
- What should I do or say when my friend loses a pet?

Statistics indicate that companion animals are becoming more valued in our society than they were just 20 or 30 years ago. More people in the United States today have pets than children, and most animal lovers regard their pets as members of the family. How you will react to the death of your own loyal companions depends largely on the part they’ve played in your daily life, the significance of your relationships with them, and the strength of your attachments to them.

Because the normal life span of most companion animals is so much shorter than your own, it is predictable that one day you will experience the loss of a beloved pet. Since the emotional bonds developed between people and animals can be very deep and strong, it’s important to understand that the pain experienced when those bonds are broken is real. The more significant the bond, the greater the feeling of loss you can expect. The grief experienced is no different from that of losing a cherished friend or special member of the family. It is a natural, spontaneous response to the loss of a significant relationship.

Nevertheless, when you lose a cherished pet you may find yourself feeling embarrassed or uneasy about publicly expressing your grief. Since there isn’t much cultural support offered to grieving animal lovers in our society, you may end up feeling very isolated and alone. Statements such as “It was just an animal” illustrate how others fail to recognize this kind of loss as significant. Your relationship with the animal may be trivialized by those “well meaning” folks who say, “You can always get another.” You may be left with the feeling that you don’t have a legitimate right to grieve. Not all those in your circle may be as understanding, as available or as capable of helping as you need them to be. You may find that friends and relatives are finished with your grief long before you are done with the work of it or the need to talk about it.

May

Memorial Day falls in the month of May, a time to remember those that have been a part of our life.

Week 1: Leave a note for your pet about what you remember most about your time together.

Write that note here:

Week 2: “Animals are such agreeable friends. They ask no questions, they pass no criticisms.”

-George Eliot

What qualities made your pet such a great friend?

Week 3: With Memorial Day in the month of May, many people will have family rituals to honor those loved ones who have died. Whether it's visiting your pet's gravesite or creating a special tribute with photos, your pet's urn, or flowers, spend some time in solitude to honor your pet, quietly and reverently. Journal that ritual here:

Week 4: On Memorial Day, light a candle to honor your pet. Have a moment of silence in honor of your pet.

How do I help myself?

Is there anything you can do to help yourself through the grief that accompanies the loss of a beloved companion animal?

Yes! First, arm yourself (and those who care about you) with some knowledge and understanding about the normal grief process. Learn what reactions you can expect in grief, and find out what can be done to manage them.

It is also important to find an understanding, nonjudgmental listener with whom you can openly acknowledge your feelings and experiences, express and work through your pain, and come to terms with your loss. That can be a fellow animal lover who respects the relationship you had with your pet, a spouse, family member, friend, neighbor, colleague at work, clergy person, pet loss counselor or telephone help-line volunteer.

What have you done to actively grive the loss of your pet?

June

Week 1: The gemstone representative of the month of June is a pearl. What were the pearls of wisdom that you learned from your pet?

Week 2: The myths of Pet Loss. Read and reflect on how you feel about these thoughts.

Week 3: "Life is a moving picture and nothing stays the same for long. It is a matter of riding out the bad times and looking towards the better ones, all the while waking up each morning giving thanks for the good and choosing to be happy despite whatever grief, sadness, or stress is there."

Read and reflect on this thought. How does this relate to you and your pet? Light a candle to honor the journey shared.

Week 4: Life with a pet is about routine, from feeding to play time to breaks outside. When a beloved pet dies, the interruption in this routine is a stark reminder that they are no longer in our home. What were the routines that you miss the most with your pet?

The Myths of Pet Loss

There are a number of myths and misconceptions surrounding this different sort of grief, the loss of an animal. Here are just a few of them:

There is nothing special about the relationship between animals and humans.

Your relationship with a companion animal can be just as special and loving as those you have with any other family member or close friend. Loving an animal is different from loving a human being, because a pet loves you in a way that people cannot: profoundly, boundlessly and unconditionally.

Losing an animal is less painful and less significant than losing a human loved one.

Pain over the loss of a beloved companion animal is as natural as the pain you would feel over the loss of any significant relationship. Since cherished pets weave their way into every aspect of your daily life, in some ways it may be even more difficult to cope with losing them. Once they're gone, you're repeatedly encountering evidence of their absence and constantly reminded of your grief.

Having close relationships with animals (and grieving at their loss) is abnormal and unnatural.

You need not let anyone influence you to believe that your relationships with animals are somehow wrong or less important than those you have with humans. Loving animals well and responsibly teaches all of us to better love all living beings, including humans. Grief is the normal response to losing someone you love, and grief is indifferent to the species of the one who is lost. Love is love, loss is loss, and pain is pain.

Relationships we have with animals are not as important as those we have with humans.

Having deeply meaningful, spiritual and healthy relationships with animals is not abnormal, and in some cases may be more emotionally healthy, spiritually healing and personally rewarding than those we have with humans. Pets offer us a kind of loyalty, devotion and unconditional love that cannot be found in the more complicated relationships we have with relatives, friends and neighbors.

Death of a pet can be a useful "dress rehearsal" for the real thing, especially for children.

Death of a pet is often a child's first real encounter with a major loss. Suddenly friendship, companionship, loyalty, support and unconditional love are replaced with overwhelming and unfamiliar feelings of loss, confusion, emptiness, fear and grief. Far from being a so-called dress rehearsal, for most children pet loss is a profoundly painful experience.

Most people think of euthanasia as a quick and easy way to get rid of their sick, dying, old or unwanted animals.

Deciding when and whether to euthanize a beloved pet is probably one of the most difficult choices an animal lover ever has to make. On the one hand, you know that choosing to end your animal's life will intensify your own emotional pain, yet postponing the decision may prolong your animal's pain and suffering needlessly. At such times it is very important to explore all aspects of the euthanasia decision with your veterinarian and with others whom you trust, to listen to what your animal may be trying to tell you, and to trust your own intuition.

Conducting rituals, funerals or memorial services for dead animals is a frivolous waste of time and money, and those who engage in such practices are eccentric and strange.

Whether for animals or for humans, death ceremonies and rituals help meet our needs to support one another in grief, acknowledge the important role our loved ones played in our lives, honor the memory of our departed companions, and bring meaning to our loss.

July

July is the month that we celebrate our freedom.

Week 1: As you continue your mourning work, what meant “celebration” to your pet? How would you celebrate life events with them?

Week 2: Beyond the Rainbow poem.

Read and reflect on what the author is saying. How does this relate to the journey of you and your pet?

Week 3: Fireworks. Many pets are afraid of the unexpected thunder of fireworks. How did you help your pet when they were faced with their fears?

Week 4: Summer time – what were your favorite summer time activities that you would do with your pet? Take some time this week to do one of those activities with a family member or member of your support system.

Beyond The Rainbow

As much as I loved the life we had and all the times we played,
I was so very tired and knew my time on earth would fade.
I saw a wondrous image then of a place that's trouble-free
Where all of us can meet again to spend eternity.

I saw the most beautiful Rainbow, and on the other side
Were meadows rich and beautiful ~ lush and green and wide!
And running through the meadows as far as the eye could see
Were animals of every sort as healthy as could be!
My own tired, failing body was fresh and healed and new
And I wanted to go run with them, but I had something left to do.

I needed to reach out to you, to tell you I'm alright
That this place is truly wonderful, then a bright
Glow pierced the night.
'Twas the Glow of many Candles shining bright
and strong and bold
And I knew then that it held your love in its
brilliant shades of gold.

For although we may not be together in the way we used to be,
We are still connected by a cord no eye can see.
So whenever you need to find me, we're never far apart
If you look beyond the Rainbow and listen with your heart.

By Cate Guyan © 1995 Used with permission

August

What if your pet really was a person?

Week 1: If your pet could talk for just 1 day, what would you have asked them? What do you think their voice would sound like?

Week 2: What would your pet say would be their occupation if they had one?

Week 3: What kind of car would your pet say they would drive?

Week 4: Did you pick your pet, or did they pick their human? Do you remember the details of their first day in your home?

FurAngels

This is for those who have gone on, and those who stayed behind to soften the hurt, and give their love.

I can still feel the soft velvet of your paw, the tickle of whiskers, that warm rasp of tongue as you decided I needed a bath. I miss the gentle rumble of your purr, the comfort of snuggle times, the silkiness of your fur. I know you've come back on occasion; I can feel you. Are you waiting for someone? Or have you come back to let me know everyone's okay? Once in a while, I find a picture of you by accident, and then remember how you hated a bath, that you loved tomato paste, and catnip was your idea of heaven. Sometimes, I forget you're not here and call another cat by your name. They look at me, astounded, that I could make such a mistake. I feel the tears start, and I try to tell myself that you're okay. Yes, I say, there are warm breezes, sunshine, butterflies, and green grass where you are. The others are there with you, so you're not completely alone, wandering and wondering. Is Megan okay? You remember that she was blind. And Patches and Phaedra...they were both deaf. Take care of Topaz, she's always been so frightened...she never knew humans could be kind. Amerber, my little earth mother...have they given you kittens to nurture and love? I'm sure Snow is bossing everyone around. He did here, why stop now? Annabel Lee, you know in your soul we didn't abandon you. We had no choice, you could have infected the kittens and they would have died. Dear beloved Annabel, my heart still hurts when I say your name. I can't stop the tears when I think of you. I can still feel your coat, soft as bunny fur, under my fingers. Your sister Emily is so very much like you, it's painful to look at her. Caesar, my very first cat....dearly loved and missed so much. G.G. - you fought so hard to live for the short time you blessed us. I know God holds you in his hand and has a special place for such a brave little cat. Ragamuffin...I knew you briefly, but those sad, golden eyes spoke eloquently of your pain. I'm sorry you didn't find me sooner, maybe I could have saved you. And you, Mouse, are you still stealing dog food and hiding it? Black Cat, Gnu and Smoke, separated for a while in life, but no longer. I tried to keep you together, but Smoke had learned not to trust. I hope you've finally found peace and warmth, Bandit. I wanted to hold you and let you know it was okay to come in from the cold. You didn't give me time. Oliver misses you Smudge. He's so big and beautiful. You wouldn't recognize him now; the constantly hungry little guy has grown into a hungry big guy. Moon, I know you're with your mother Mattie, and your sister Annabel Lee. I'm sorry you had to find them so soon. We were just getting to be friends. Katie, I hope you're running through the water you so dearly loved to play in here. How you loved being held in the shower! Coco, my loyal and protective wolf friend. I feel privileged to have shared my life and my home with you. Sometimes, God grants our secret wishes in small ways, and He gave me you. Ah, Yuri. You willingly shared Charlie with me, knowing I wouldn't hurt him or you. You offered me your devotion and love. How could I not accept so precious a gift?

I know some of you will look and not see your names mentioned here. Have I forgotten so quickly? Don't I love you as much as those whose names are written? My precious fur angels! How could you think I don't love you? If I could, I would reverse time, so we could once again share the happiness and love. Your faces are as clear to me as if it were yesterday and you were here, asking for dinner and demanding to be petted. I can barely see through my tears to write this. All of you brought light, life and joy to me. I cherish the memories of your love and trust. We've planted flowers and trees in honor of your memories. Every spring and summer, the sadness is softened by the beauty that blooms. As I look out my windows, I am reminded of each and every one of you. My dear little friends, know that I keep you in my heart. As long as I remember your names, you will never be forgotten, or replaced. One day, we will all be together in the sunshine, warm breezes, and green meadows. Until that time, you are missed....and loved.... always loved.

September

Week 1: National Pet Memorial Day is next week. Take some time this week to prepare and plan a service or tribute. What will the service look like?

Week 2: Sunday of this week is National Pet Memorial Day. How will you carry out a tribute to your pet? How could you pay tribute to all of the pets lost this year?

Week 3: Read and reflect on "Fur Angles"

Week 4: Take some time this week to reflect on the emotion of being sad. What does this mean to you and what are your coping mechanisms that can help during this emotion?

October

October is the month where many Pet Blessings happen across the country as many religious affiliations celebrate St. Frances, the patron saint of pets.

Week 1: Why were you blessed to have your pet in your life and with your family?

Week 2: Why was your pet blessed to have you in their life? What are some wonderful things that you have done for your pet to make them smile?

Week 3:

I have left you now, but please don't be sad,
you gave me all the love you had.
You did so much for me in my time here
and I'll always hold those precious times near.

I know someday you'll find love again
and into your life will come a new friend.
Your heart will heal, though you'll never forget
memories like the first time we met.

Memories are wonderful, so keep them close
and remember all the good times the most.
Up in the Heaven for animals is where I'll be
and someday in the future, each other we'll see.

I am at PEACE now, so please don't be sad
You gave me all the love you had.
by Tracy M. Johnson

Read and reflect on the above poem. How does this make you feel right now?

Week 4: This week is Halloween. If your pet could choose 1 costume for Halloween, what would they choose and why?

Paw Prints on My Heart

You came into my heart one day,
So beautiful and smart,
My dear and sweet companion,
I loved you from the start.

And though I knew the time
Would come
When we would have to part,
You'll never be forgotten
You left paw prints on my heart.

Author Unknown

November

For each week of November, please do an event that honors your pet and shows your thankfulness for the time you had together.

Ah, the month of being thankful. Even more so, the month to be mindful of all those we've been blessed to have in our life.

Week 1: Reflect on all of those animals throughout your life. List them and take time to remember them.

Week 2: "Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened." - Anatole France
What part of your soul did your pet touch, awaken, or enhance?

Week 3: If someone loved an animal like you loved yours, and then subsequently felt the pain of grief upon their death, what advice would you share with them?

Week 4: Write a prayer, or a note, of thanksgiving. One for your pet, or about your pet.

A Time of Remembrance

by Isabel M.Gordon

Sometimes I sit in my room after a long difficult day and just think...I let my mind meander and chase fleeting thoughts on gossamer wings. I dive and soar through my recollections of moments. Some are sweet or joyful. They uplift me and make me feel as though I am really flying...whoosh! I can almost feel the wind against my face. Others touch the places inside that are still bruised and hurt. They're the ones that spring up suddenly and with no warning; like a sharp turn on that tailwind I am riding. Tonight I sat down for my journey. I never thought my wanderings would ever take me to the special place I saw tonight.

As I glanced at the calendar I couldn't help but notice how quickly the year has passed. Being a methodical person, it was a natural course that I would take a quick look back and make a brief tally of my victories and losses this year. The losses came to mind first and were the first of three legs in this night's adventure. I could feel the tears well up in my eyes as my most recent upheaval flashed before my eyes. I wondered if I would ever feel safe again; if I would ever feel secure in the health of my family. Thinking about all we have been through I suddenly had the inclination to reach down to my right, where Buster always rested, and lay my hand on his head like I've done so many times before. He would lay quietly; sometimes I think he actually took those little flights of fancy with me. I reached for him...but tonight he wasn't there. So this time I made my journey alone...or did I?

Drifting down that misty road I became aware of a warm familiar feeling...a feeling of being safe. I couldn't see anyone there, but I knew Buster was there; I could feel him. It was so natural to talk to him and tell him how much I've missed him. I asked him if he was ok...if he was happy. I expected this to be a painful catharsis, but it turned out to be a celebration of the love we share with our once in a lifetime companions. "I'm fine..really I am. We all are. Our days are full with games, chasing squirrels and anything else that comes along. I like the puppies best of all. They come here like little lost children but immediately catch sight of the bridge and all the bridge keepers and their little hearts are light once more". "Are you ever lonely or frightened? Who takes care of you if you are sick?" I asked.

"Oh ma, we never get sick here. And there is never anything frightening. Sometimes we go to the Bridge and watch as some moms and dads come to meet their bridgekids. It's always such a wonderful thing. Each day brings another happy reunion and we celebrate together. We get visits every once in a while from humans who don't have a bridgekid of their own but love animals; or from children who never had a chance to have pets. Those are my favorite visitors! At night we count stars and tell stories about our lives with you and the fun times we had" Buster's voice conveyed such bliss that I felt happy for him.

"Our visit will be over soon, but I want you to deliver this message to our humans back home. Please tell them that our happiness can only be complete if we can look down to them and see smiles on their faces when they think of us because then we will know they *understand*" I told him that at this time of year we can't help but think of our bridgekids and miss them perhaps a little more. I told him how I wished he had had one more Merry Christmas...or Happy New Year. "We have very Merry Christmas' here! All the children, puppies, dogs, cats... just everybody who is not there with you is here with us! You know what? We even get to help make some of that holiday magic you feel. We are still with you if you would just see us. I was your heartdog; but here we are everyone's." Suddenly it became so clear to me. Finally I understood. They are now a part of that light from which all good things flow. They are the hush we hear in the night after a snowfall; the sweet scent after a summer storm. They are the beauty we see each Spring when the hills are bathed in hues of red, yellow and blue on a bed of green. They are the warmth we feel from the sun touching our skin. They are all things eternal. The coldest of Winters will give way to Spring which in turn will step aside as Summer awakens from her sleep. Now they are part of this cycle once more.

My journey is coming to its conclusion as I feel the gentle but steady pull of reality. The treasure I have brought back with me is one to share with you.

But I said there were three legs of this journey. Now that I have revisited and given some closure to things in the past, it's time to look forward to the future. Here's hoping that peace, acceptance and fond memories light our journey like little footlights in the dark. And when the final steps are taken, may we all rejoice in seeing our own bridgekids as their turn comes to reunite amidst the cheers and tears of joy.

December

Week 1: Create an ornament in honor of your pet and place a special tribute for your pet.

Week 2: A Time of Remembrance – read and reflect on this piece. How do you feel about your journey so far, this year?

Week 3: Think about your holiday traditions and how your pet made them special. Did they knock over the Christmas tree each year? Were they in the kitchen when cookies or other treats were being made? Did they cuddle on the couch in front of the fireplace at night? How are these memories special and what can you do to keep the memories alive?

Week 4: Record of re-defining
I used to be _____. Now that _____ has died, I am _____.
This makes me feel _____.

Here's My Wish For You

Throughout the year, it seems everyone will experience a variety of emotions based on life events and life experiences. From smells to seasons, the entire year is full of stark reminders of good and pleasant memories, or harsh reminders of lost loves and broken-hearted moments.

There's nothing like the smell of fresh blooming tulips to transport one immediately back to fond memories of Easter, a whiff of perfume for a beautiful reminder of someone special, the smell of fresh cut grass to say summer has arrived, or the smell of wheat to take an old farm girl right back to the fields.

Or possibly it's that first snowfall of the season, the time when that silly Golden Retriever ran outside, laid on his back and wiggled in delight, and created the most beautiful doggie snow angels. Or the first time the Christmas boxes came out of the attic, only to find oneself in a heap of tears as the grumpy, old, smelly cat's ornaments were tenderly tucked away from a year ago, a time when the old normal was normal, and life's book had not yet closed a chapter named Tiger.

And then, there are just those "reminders." The day one starts a normal day and for unknown reasons, with a heart that is heavier than normal. With one glance at the calendar, the tears start as you are immediately taken back to that day, one year ago or possibly many years ago, when you said good-bye to your special love. You remember the minutes like they just happened, you remember the smells, the air, the sounds... you remember it all like it was happening again.

The depth of love for an animal can sometimes be as mysterious as the complexity of the grief felt when they die. And sometimes, one doesn't fully understand how much they loved that silly old dog or that crazy old cat, until the time comes when they are no longer physically present. All you know is you loved them. You loved everything about them.

What is interesting about the animals that occupy a part of our home and heart is the mere fact their whole purpose of being in our world is to love us. They won't graduate from college and get good grades, solve world peace, or do anything more than love. They are only in our world to love us.

Yes, their love can be mysterious, and the grief can be overwhelming. But, here's my wish for you, not only during the holidays but throughout the entire year. My wish for you is that you are kind to yourself. You treat yourself like you would treat any good friend, with kindness, with love, with care, and with compassion. You're kind to yourself and you allow yourself to fully love, and to fully grieve, for those amazing animals that have touched your human heart and soul.

And, not only be kind to yourself, but also to allow yourself the time and space to honor those special loves that are now locked fully and forever into your heart. When you find yourself throwing your nose to the sky because a smell sparks a memory, or you find a bit of hair that's still hanging around all these weeks or months later, smile. Honor the memory. Give yourself permission to shed a tear, and to remember. Stop for a minute, and be present to the beauty of that memory. Give yourself permission to remember, give yourself permission to feel, and give yourself permission to just "be" for a minute versus hurrying off to "do" your day.

At the heart of all of this, is the permission to be reminded that it was all real. The life, the love, and the chapter you shared. It was all real.

Even in its amazing, glorious, mysterious way.

Thoughts:

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