



Connecting

March 2021

Animal Companions

Images of little chicks and Easter bunnies are everywhere; while wild rabbits enjoy the Bulk Barn rabbit food tucked under our front tree.

Seems an appropriate time to address the heartbreak that occurs with pet loss.

Many who are already grieving are inconsolable when their pet then dies...for many, their sole companion, full time therapist & confidante — always ready to lick away their tears. No matter whether you cared for a bird, turtle, cat, dog, or baby goat, you are entitled to grieve when they pass.

Pet people are generally compassionate, generous and empathetic — those who have a lot of love to give, and understand how pets fill our lives with joy and purpose. Pet lovers also agree that the eventual death of those cherished pets is beyond devastating!

To those who understand, no explanation is necessary; to those who don't, no explanation will suffice.

-- paraphrasing Thomas Aquinas

So I will say right up front, that some family, friends, co-workers and others may wonder why you are so devastated or shake their heads at your “inability to cope” when your pet is ill or nearing death.

You have often heard me speak about disenfranchised grief, which is a term used to describe grief that is often misunderstood or barely acknowledged by society. You may find that your pet grief is not always validated in the way it would be if a human family member had passed away -- and that may stun, disappoint or anger you. Those who seem to lack empathy or compassion may never have had a pet. Others may make a clear distinction between “work or farm animals” and house-pets; and give less credence to the latter. Still others shudder to think that the loss of an animal would find its way into a grief column at all.

I can only say that judging from the calls I get, and my own experiences, that pet grief is very real and very painful. Folks ask about the intensity of their grief feelings and emotions, or the duration—whether those feelings are justified, normal or healthy..... noting that they feel much the same as they did after a significant human loss. All are very good questions, and grief symptoms are indeed very much the same in many ways.

I recall decades ago, when our girls were little, our hamster developed mange, a skin disease. After numerous trips to the vet for ointments, shots, medicine, and the rest.....the vet sat my husband down and



Recognize the optimism within you, that each day brings new possibilities to explore.

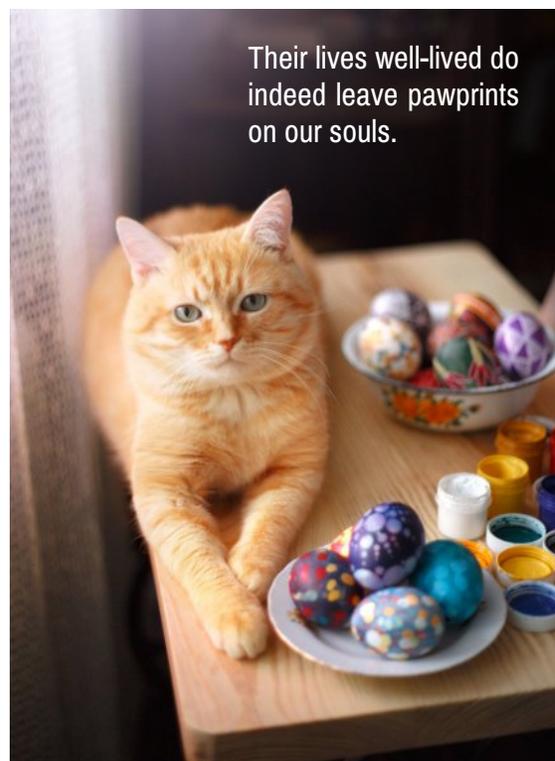
with a straight face, quietly said, “do you know that these little fellas are only worth a few bucks?” to which an already agitated dad responded , ”Oh but you don’t understand. I can’t go back home without THIS hamster!” He knew that the solution was not as simple as replacing that hamster with a new one-- that looked “almost like Ginger”. That would not go over well with the three women he lived with; so we continued to nurse the creature until it left us naturally. Big or small....in our family, we grieve them all.

Today I am going to dedicate this article to the millions of furry creatures, those with feathers, and amphibians who have captured our hearts over the years. When a parent, sibling, friend, child or spouse dies, we expect to grieve deeply. We are less prepared for the intensity of our sorrow when a “special, but different” family member leaves us. It seems unfathomable how deep the pain seems to have migrated deeply into our bones; and yes, it is not uncommon to weep quietly many years after a pet dies when we hear a sad animal story on the news, or see another pet that looks like ours. If we learned how to move forward after a

period of mourning and bereavement of an ailing parent, we may be trapped in self-reflection and incredible guilt, fearing that we valued an animal life over a human’s. Is it that we care more about animals than we do our people? Of course not. Those we love are embedded into our souls no matter their colour, creed, or genetic 23 and Me revelations. Pets become our family, our babies, our travelling companions, our jogging buddies...whatever we need them to be--so it is obvious to anyone who has ever loved or nurtured a pet to instinctively know that their loss is in no way diminished because they walk on four legs instead of two. There is nothing to be gained by measuring one loss against another. Emotions fluctuate depending on circumstances in any given moment; so allowing our grief to be fluid and versatile lets us go with the flow, knowing what we feel is okay...without gauging every action or reaction. I chose to give our two tiny yorkies a special place in the yard, my so called “pet cemetery”. It is my quiet sanctuary or healing place. Seeing the names of my precious puppies on their memorial stones warms my heart and triggers the brain to release that serotonin and feeling of wellness that comes

from remembering their playful antics and learned “smiles”. Even their comforting touch comes back in an instant. My office bulletin board holds their newspaper obituaries reminding me that a few critters in heaven are checking out every nook and cranny looking for me....and their favourite treats! We can all find our own way of keeping their spirits near us. Pictures are helpful too.

Many who are grieving the death of a family member in our lives find themselves left to care for the family pet after the person dies. This comforts us thru our grief, despite a constant reminder that this was “mom’s goldfish, Helen” or “Dad’s old dog, Winston.” You may be grateful that you still have the kitten you got your late wife for a wedding present..... until that animal itself gets old, sick or infirm. When the fateful day comes to take its final ride to the veterinary clinic, it is impossible not to be consumed with overwhelming grief and sorrow as you can only nod to the receptionist whether or not you want to be with Sadie as the doctor “takes care of her.” I remember how difficult that decision was, even though that little animal seemed to sense my pain, despite her own... and understood. The only way I could reconcile in my own mind that “this was the right thing to do” was to recall how I promised to take good care of this little creature and would never let it suffer in any way. It was my responsibility.... no, my duty.... to keep my promise. Why then, was it such a difficult thing to do? We devote so many years of our lives to caring for an animal from its infancy to its death... we teach it to go down stairs safely, we potty train the little critter, we socialize the animal so it is a pleasant and loving member of society when we walk it outdoors, we race to the vet and spare no expense to find out why Herbie has suddenly turned up his nose at his favourite kibbles, and we sacrifice our favourite blanket for the newcomer. So our commitment, our bond, our dedication, and all the sacrifices we make (personal and financial) to ensuring it was stimulated, fed,



Their lives well-lived do indeed leave pawprints on our souls.

exercised, immunized on time, and spoiled like crazy, guarantee that we will also desperately miss that wee soul when he/she is no longer at our side. Eating toast alone is no longer as much fun in the morning without a little face waiting for a bite. Walks outdoors are lonelier. The other cat huddles in a corner, sad and lonely, missing her playmate. It is said that animals pick us, not the other way around. When I have gone to



see a litter of puppies, there was an instant connection to a certain one.... the runt of the litter, who sensed that we would protect her from clumsy little grandkids. She jumped up into our arms and would not get down so we could pet any of the others. Maybe yours gave the most exuberant kisses? Did he make serious eye contact while the others were too busy chasing a ball with the others? There seems to be some spiritual connection between humans and animals that remains with us.

nor should it be done to discourage or diminish healthy grieving. Sometimes it is just best not to interfere with or compromise the bereavement process—allowing it to unfold as it should. We all know when, or if, we are ready to welcome somebody else into our lives after a death occurs.... whether it be a human death or a pet loss. Some may choose not to have another animal due to restrictions on animals where they live, their advancing age or other physical conditions that limit their ability to care for or exercise an animal. So each person should be allowed the respect and dignity to know what is best for them, and be supported in that decision, unless of course, it puts the animal at risk.



Animals come to us for a reason or a season . . . they leave us quietly when their work is done.

After a pet dies, you may wish to bury him/her in a special place or choose cremation. Anything you can do to mark a life that brought you joy will help to ease your sorrow. Friends can send a card or offer some kind words of support when a friend is mourning their pet. Talk about their grief as you would with anybody who has lost a beloved family member. Allow them the time and opportunity to grieve their loss in their own way. Getting a new pet is not the answer for everyone. That is a personal decision, and not one to be made by well-meaning folks who land on somebody's doorstep with a stray kitten or dog that needs a home. This is not something like a teapot that you might choose for somebody else,

For those who have no children, no friends or family in the area, or those who depend on animals for their safety or wellbeing, there is no measure for what this animal provided, such in the case of police dogs, therapy animals, like those who assist their owners in dealing with PTSD, limited vision, seizures or the like. It takes much time and training before another can be ready for “work”. So the grief of pet loss is now coupled with the secondary loss of setting limits on what a person may be able to do without that assistance. Animals can sense when we are sad, anxious or afraid, and they comfort, protect and guide us accordingly. They sit quietly by our side as we weep after the loss of a loved one. They see our tears and their unconditional love is palpable. We remember that.

The most poignant human/animal connection I witnessed many years ago when I took our little dog to the Annual Blessing

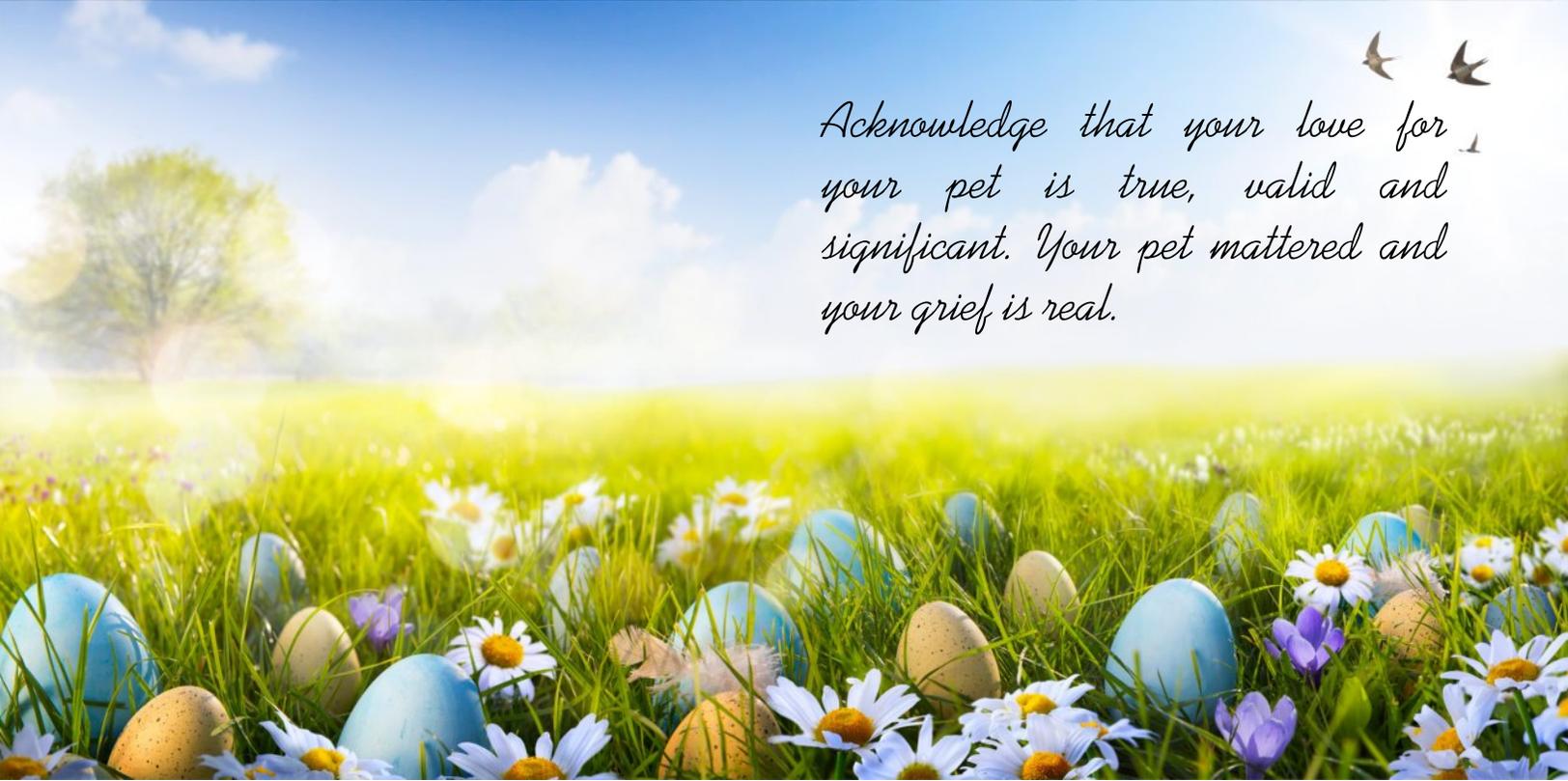
of the Animals at a lovely Anglican church in Edmonton. People streamed past the pews to have their beloved pets each individually blessed by the minister at the front of the church. As the line got shorter, suddenly we heard a quiet shuffle of movement at the back of the church; as an RCMP officer entered, in his bright red serge, leading a meticulously groomed horse to the front of the church to meet the pastor and get his blessing. What a beautiful way to say.... without uttering a word.... that animals are God's creatures too; and just how much this horse meant to him...how much all our animals mean to us. I recall that image often. Don't all pets deserve to be mourned, remembered, celebrated, honoured and blessed.... just like that?

Acknowledge that your love for your pet is true, valid and significant....your pet mattered and your grief is real.

Remind yourself that you are entitled to grieve—when we lose somebody we love, it's OK to ask for time and space to grieve their passing. Create your own rituals, make a memorial rock, create a photo album, write about your pets, draw, paint or create in your own special way.

Plant a little shrub and tag it with their name. Share stories about your pet's life and your sadness in losing them. Know that you're not alone.

Pets give us the chance to teach children, grandchildren and others what it is like to care for another living being....how to be a better person....and what joy there is in sharing your life with another species. Even a chicken, like my daughter's "Dale" wanted to be held and cuddled, so she knew well what a loving touch felt like. YouTube is a lovely way to lift our spirits when we are grieving any loss; and my favourite ones are always "animal companions with unlikely friends," or the interactions between people and animals....or how animals show emotion or remember their owners, even after many years. They all teach us that love endures all things. If you miss your animal but have chosen not to get another, you may want to share your love while volunteering for an animal shelter, fostering animals until they are ready for their new home, or walking a neighbour's dog while she is recovering from surgery. Even working the phones for the Humane Society or helping with the Lotteries that raise funds for the care of these animals can



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be a generous and wonderful way to honour the memory of your loving cat, bird, or horse friends.

I know the pain one feels coming home to an empty house without somebody waiting on the other side of the door ready with wide toothy smiles, soft licks, and excited yelps when they see your face. Your sorrow touches my heart; and I am so very sorry for your loss, especially during the past year when it has been difficult to share those feelings with your support people in person. Know that those who mourn so deeply, have also loved as deeply; so your companion was indeed blessed to have chosen you in our universe! Animals come to us for a reason or a season....to see us through difficult times--and when we are able to handle things on our own, they leave quietly when their work is done. Animals love us unconditionally. They don't care about wrinkles, skin colour, missing limbs, or a nagging stutter. It is no wonder we miss them so much. Children

often experience their very first grief experience with the loss of a beloved pet.

I remember hearing about a little boy whose turn it was to read the morning prayer over the intercom at an area school. He recited the prayer on the note as laid out for him, then added a few words of his own...." Please bless my grandma and grandpa, and especially my hermit crab, Henry, in heaven!" If anyone still doubts the lingering sadness a child feels after burying a little crab, I have nothing else to add....

It always generates smiles when we see lovely pet pictures sprinkled in amidst the dozens of people pictures on display at our candlelight celebration to honour our deceased loved ones. (A true testament that lives "well lived" do indeed leave pawprints on our souls). I leave you with a lovely little poem that gives us hope that one day... someday... we, too, will cross.....

The Rainbow Bridge

There is a bridge connecting Heaven and Earth. It is called the Rainbow Bridge because of its many colours. Just this side of the Rainbow Bridge there is a land of meadows, hills, and valleys with lush green grass.

When a beloved pet dies, the pet goes to this place. There is always food and water and warm spring weather. The old and frail animals are young again. Those who are maimed are made whole again. They play all day with each other.

There is only one thing missing. They are not with their special people who loved them on Earth. So, each day they run and play until the day comes when one suddenly stops playing and looks up! The nose twitches! The ears are up! The eyes are staring! And this one suddenly runs from the group!

You have been seen, and when you and your special friend meet, you take him or her in your arms and embrace. Your face is kissed again and again and again, and you look once more into the eyes of your trusting pet.

Then you cross the Rainbow Bridge together, never again to be separated.

(Author Unknown)



As we all prepare to celebrate the Easter season in whatever ways we can do so safely this year, try to think of it as being a time of rebirth, renewal, and refreshing of your spirit as you move closer to the warm days of spring and the seasonal changes around us.

Sending you all a few little “mini-eggs” full of best wishes and ideas that you can pull out of your virtual Easter Basket in the coming days as you grapple with your own ongoing grief:

Healing of your heart. Some of you may have already noticed a gradual subsiding of the acute, raw pain over time. If you have periods of calmness and peace, know that your heart is beginning to heal.

A decrease in the amount of grief-bursts. As time passes, you will find yourself going for longer stretches without crying; or that the sudden bursts of intense feelings don’t last as long.

Improved self care. Taking better care of yourself includes increasing your activity level, getting into better physical shape, eating healthier, doing things that refresh and revitalize you, spiritually, emotionally or physically.

Reminiscing about happier times. This might include being able to look at pictures again and smile, being able to think about the life of the person, not just about their death.

Finding ways to stay connected and honour the memory of the person who died. Taking on some type of meaningful work/project that connects you to your loved one.

Easter

Experiencing gratitude. Honour the memory of the person who died by doing something in their name as a way of keeping their memory alive.

Rediscovering joy. Allow yourself to both grieve and experience pleasure in life will bring more balance. It is a matter of and rather than one or the other.

Finding hope and resilience. Recognize an optimism within you that each day brings new possibilities to explore. You gradually reinvest in life; and as you do, you begin to feel hopeful about the year ahead.

May this Easter season bring you peace, good health and healing amidst your grief.

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