



Natural Transitions

Volume 6 Issue 1

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life



Your Pet's Final Pawprint

Pet Loss: A Childhood Rite of Passage

The Art of Dying: What Animals Teach Us

Pet Home Funerals

Pets and Death



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LAST WORDS: *Christine Pateros is an artist, shamanic practitioner, teacher, and writer. She paints your loved one's soul, your soul's journey and its highest destiny, its retrieval, and your spirit or animal guides. She works worldwide, remotely and in-person to create art and provide*

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Animal Death in a Human World

by Karen van Vuuren




Karen van Vuuren

Until recently, my experience of pet death was limited. I had witnessed the demise of two very and one moderately short-lived hamsters which probably gorged themselves to death on a feast of nasty red synthetic carpet, a diseased guppy I netted from a polluted London canal, and a handful of baby sparrows, which plopped from a nest onto our house roof. My childhood companion and sanity-saver, Mitzy the cat, survived many years on our busy street only to meet her end in our driveway under the wheel of a visitor's car. When it happened, I was a young adult living away from home, so I mourned her departure from afar.

As I was receiving the most amazing array of pet memorialization and home funeral photos for this issue, a friend asked me if I would attend the euthanization of her cat. It turned out to be my most intense deathbed experience with any being, including humans. Many pet owners admit that their animals are like their children. That was how Celia the cat was to Carolyn. Those gathered in the room shared their emotions as the kindly vet explained the procedure. Everyone there had suffered a painful loss. One woman's husband had ended his own life the year before. Carolyn's husband had died as a young man, three weeks after their marriage. There was intense grief during the process of sending this glossy-coated but terminally ill creature on its way out of this life.

In speaking with the vet a few days after Celia's passing, he confessed, "It's never easy for me to euthanize an animal. I always ask myself, every time, do I have the right to take this life?" Yet this vet had often cared for these creatures throughout their lives, so their owners felt comfortable and safe with him. He did what he had to do in the gentlest way possible. But it weighed on him. He'd euthanized thousands of creatures. "Can you imagine that?" he asked. I admit, I couldn't.

In this issue of NTM, we share opinions about euthanization and hospice for our pets and highlight the ways we let them go. We hear from pioneering holistic veterinarians, animal sanctuary founders, and others who all raise important questions: How much do we anthropomorphize our pets and their suffering? Do we really understand animal behavior? Do we equate it with the human being's response to illness, infused with our emotions and fears? Is a pet that has lived so closely with humans in a different category to an animal in the wild whose suffering ends in the jaws of a predator? When we can end their suffering, shouldn't we do that? What is our role and responsibility to these loyal companions who have given us so much? I imagine that for most of us, what we choose for our pets is probably what we would choose for ourselves. And the choices are just as difficult. 



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OUR VISION

- Acceptance of death, loss, and grief as a natural part of life

OUR MISSION

- To share holistic approaches to end of life
- To provide a forum for end-of-life caregivers and educators

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Pet Loss: A Childhood Rite of Passage

by Cook Rodgers

The simple cross, crafted of two small pieces of wood, had the letters SUF printed on it in a child's scrawl. Our 10-year-old son told us it stood for "Skinny Used to be Fat." My husband and I had just helped our beloved cat Buffington Electric Buffalo Limited, otherwise known as Buffy, cross the threshold. We decided that the best thing would be to give our son and his younger brother a meaningful task to help with her burial, and they decided to head for the wood shop to make some crosses. They were not present for the euthanasia but helped us prepare Buffy's body for burial in our backyard under a favorite bush and lower her into the ground. Amid tears, goodbyes and thank yous, we covered her body with soil and planted the wooden cross, and the boys gathered flowers to place on her grave.

We made the decisions around Buffy's death one at a time, taking into full consideration the children and their feelings. Our grief was also present. She was, after all, one of our animal "children" before the human ones joined us. Buffy had been a vital member of our family from the time she came to us as a tiny kitten, and her sweet and loving personality had grown as long as her name. She was a great source of joy for our family for 17 years, and it was hard to let her go. But we knew it was time.

When the time comes that we must make decisions around end-of-life care for our beloved pets it is important to consider the children: their emotions, their fears, their very tender places; helping them confide in adults and openly grieve without embarrassment and shame. While each child is an individual who will react to the death of a pet in his or her own way, it can be helpful for the adults to have some guidelines, especially when we are dealing with our own grief.

A pet may provide the first exposure involving an emotional attachment that a child will have involving serious illness, injury, the natural aging process, or the finality of death. Frequently, it is a child's first experience with the loss of a loved one. The pet is usually part of their everyday lives. My kindergarten teacher friend says that if you listen carefully to the words that children express about the death of a pet or that of a grandparent, they are the same. A child's grief reaction may not be as intense to the death of a pet as it would be for the death of a person, but sometimes it is.

Children's Grief

Each child is unique. How any one child will react to a pet's death is dependent on the following factors:

Individual temperament and the child's relationship with the pet. If a child has formed a deep attachment, he or she will grieve the loss of a beloved friend. Some children have a strong connection to the animal world. Sometimes they confide their inner thoughts, fears and dreams to their animal companion as I did to my Boston terrier, Sergeant, when the chaos of my large family became too much for me.

The circumstances of the death. If it was prolonged, sudden, or if the child was present or involved.

Other circumstances in a child's family life. Major stresses or changes like moving, or other loss.

Gender. Boys may hold more of their grief inside; at least traditionally this is what has been asked of them. We can hope that this is changing.

Age. A child views the processes of death differently at different developmental stages. Under the age of five there is little understanding of

what it means to die. A child knows that death is different from life, but doesn't understand that it is permanent. Often a child will show a curiosity about the physical processes of death. Emotions may or may not be expressed, but a child will be affected by the emotions of other family members.

Around the age of seven, a child begins to understand the finality of death. This will bring new thoughts and questions. Some of them may be fearful. When a child is old enough to realize that a loved pet will never return, he or she will experience true grief.

By the age of nine or ten, a child begins to understand death more in the same way that an adult does—that it is inevitable and will happen to every living being. This may cause feelings of insecurity as a child thinks about his or her own death or the deaths of parents or close family members.

How Children Grieve

In many ways, a child's grief reaction to the loss of a beloved person or pet is similar to an adult's. He or she may cry and show sadness, act depressed or withdrawn, or seek comfort from others. But children also process death in ways that are different from adults. Sometimes they think that death is caused by doing something bad. A child may blame herself for the death because she forgot to feed the pet one day or let it run without its leash. A child may also become angry at parents or a veterinarian because she thinks that adults have the power to prevent death.

Most children will work through their grief very easily, with a few tears and some expressed sadness. But because their feelings are often reflected in their behavior rather than words, sometimes there are challenges, which a parent

may not immediately connect with the loss. Feelings about the loss of a pet may cause regression in behavior: becoming fearful and clinging to adults, having nightmares or problems sleeping. A child may also act out anger, with some aggression toward people or property. Sometimes it may be hard to focus on school and homework, so it is important to alert teachers and other adults about the loss of their pet.

Length of Grief

It is characteristic of young children to show grief for very short periods of time, interspersing these periods in the normal activities of playing and living. Over time, a child's grief reactions should start to lessen as he or she begins to turn attention to other things. Symptoms of grief may continue to surface for a long time after the loss of a special pet, but they should diminish over time and eventually disappear. Sometimes when a child hits the challenges of a new developmental stage, memories will be reprocessed with a new understanding. If grief lingers, it may be necessary to discover if there are other underlying issues that could be explored with the help of a professional counselor.

Role of the Parent

A child will need loving and supportive attention. If you are also grieving, share it with her. She will be looking to you as her role model. Make sure your child knows it is okay to grieve for a loss, and never make it seem silly or inappropriate.

Openness and Honesty. If there is an accident or the family pet becomes seriously ill, be open and honest about your pet's well-being. Hiding or avoiding the facts will only cause confusion and anxiety. Your explanations of what is happening to your pet can best be guided by the child's questions, which

should be encouraged and answered in simple terms for the very young and in more depth for the child who has a deeper level of understanding. We can help a young child process his thoughts and feelings through play and using toys, drawing pictures, or telling a story.

Knowing your own feelings will make it easier to reach out to your child in an appropriate and sympathetic way.

A first inclination is often to wish to shelter a child from the truth of a pet's death. We may feel that a child is too young to understand what is happening. But even if a child's processing is different, it is important to be truthful.

The Right Words. Use correct but simple terms when talking to a child about death. Young children take words very literally. If you tell a child that the pet "went on a trip," "was lost," or "is sleeping," he may wait for the pet to come back, go looking for the pet, or be afraid to go to sleep. It is very appropriate to talk about the finality of death and the sadness of a pet's death even to a very young child. Sometimes we may need to explain that death isn't "catching" or that dying has nothing to do with being good or bad. One way to explain a pet's death is that the pet was very, very old; very, very sick; or very, very hurt.

Children are naturally curious and they will likely ask questions about the physical aspects of death, such as, "What will happen to his body in the ground?" or "Won't she get cold?" They can be answered simply. Usually if a child wants more information, he will ask. As a child grows, his view of death matures and more information can be processed. Eventually he will be able to think and talk about the medical and spiritual aspects of death.

Euthanasia - A Difficult Decision. Often the difficult choice is given to a family whether or not to "put a pet to sleep," as it has traditionally been referred to. We are asked to make

this choice to the best of our ability on behalf of the pet. Some veterinarians use the term "helping to die" in lieu of "putting to sleep" when young children are involved. Even though a child will not have responsibility for the final decision, it is important that his feelings be considered. Understanding that painless euthanasia has become necessary because of the suffering of the pet is important. In some circumstances, it may be better to keep the discussion and decision from the child and give him the comfort that trusted adults are in charge.

Should a child be present for euthanasia? If he has had a close relationship with the pet, has been helping to care for the pet, and the situation feels age-appropriate, then you should consider his choice to be present. Prior preparation from both you and the veterinarian is crucial. If a child chooses not to be present, then he should have the opportunity to say goodbye to the pet, and see and touch, if desired, the body after the death. This leaves no question in a child's mind as to whether the death took place.

Celebrating a Pet's Life.

After a special pet dies, a memorial acknowledges its importance in the lives of family members. The purpose is to help the family finalize the death and gather personal memories. A service could be a simple burial, or a scattering of ashes with words or songs. A tree, a bush, or flowers could be planted. Perhaps the family would like to make a contribution to an animal shelter in their pet's name or prepare a clay or ink paw print or take a hair clipping. What is important is for a child to actively participate so that his relationship with the pet can be memorialized in some way that feels meaningful to him.

Memories. Gradually, grief will be replaced with special happy, sad, funny and fond memories. Creating a story or a poem about the death event itself, some special characteristics of the pet,



Ringo and children

Cook Rodgers

or a special shared activity between pet and child is helpful. My husband's family started a tradition of finding a kitty or doggy star in the sky, so you could always look up and find their star to help answer the question, "Where do they go?" A photo book or a shadow box is also a fine remembrance.

A New Pet. When is a child ready to replace a pet? When she has worked through most of his or her grief and starting to move on with life—not before. It may be tempting for a parent to replace the pet immediately for the child's sake, but if the child is still grieving, a new pet will unlikely bring her out of it. If a pet is replaced too soon, it is possible that the child will react with anger or rejection. Acceptance of the new pet may signify betrayal of

the one that has died. Waiting a while to replace a pet tells a child that life is valued and not easily replaceable. Healing involves taking the time to let go, allowing the memories and emotions settle before turning love and attention to a new living being.

The last and a most precious gift our beloved pets give to our children is in their passing, providing an opportunity to bond as a family and share love and connection with one another. How we approach pet loss with our children will set the stage for healthy grieving for all the other deaths and losses they will experience throughout their lives. 🌱

RESOURCES

Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital, Argus Center for Pet Loss



Cook Rodgers, MS, has a background in human development, family studies, and animal assisted therapy. She shares life with her partner, Pete Rodgers, DVM, who has helped many families make difficult end of life decisions for their pets. They have eulogized a multitude of their own beloved pets with their two sons, now grown, and have created a "grotto" on their land that is dedicated to their special companions.

Trotting Lightly at the End: Our Pets' Final Paw Prints

by Mary Reilly-McNellan

Many people may not recall their first day at school or their first scraped knee, but nearly everyone remembers the death of their first pet. My own inaugural experience with grief came at the age of nine, when I lost my beloved turtle, Patrick. He was one of those little red-eared slider turtles that were readily available from dime stores in the early 1960s, and he spent most of his short life in the standard plastic aquarium adorned with a small plastic palm tree. He enjoyed an occasional romp on the carpet and eating raw hamburger. I never knew what took him, but I do remember my older brother's attempts to soothe my tears after Patrick's death. "He had a good life," he gently reminded me as we buried Patrick in a small metal container on the side of our house. I often wished that I had inscribed those comforting words on a stone to mark the location of his final resting place. I suspect that my pet's mummified remains are still encased in the tiny metal vault, perhaps to be uncovered one day by an unsuspecting archeologist.

Yes, we love our pets. They are devoted companions who love us unconditionally, cheer us when we are sad, and shatter our hearts when they die. Nowhere is this more poignantly palpable than at a pet cemetery, and I found myself frequently reaching for Kleenex during a recent visit to the Denver Pet Cemetery in Commerce City, CO. This final resting place for our beloved animal companions was established in 1939 "because they loved us," as the entry sign affirms. Now in considerable disrepair, the cemetery's broken, overgrown markers add to the feeling of sorrow and heartache. A small, granite headstone displays the vandalized photo of a beloved Boston terrier named Jimmy, kitty-corner to the grave of Timothy, an adored cockatiel. Another monument pays tribute to a pet named Mike, informing us that "he was a

nice guy"—although probably no relation to Mickey Mouse, buried nearby. Ruby is remembered for her "Big Ears, Much Bigger Heart," and Sparky, who "Left His Pawprints All Over Our Hearts."

It was a rough afternoon, to say the least.

Towering over the cemetery are three smokestacks—telltale evidence of an on-site crematory that reduces pet remains to bones. Cremation remains our country's preferred method for final disposition of our cherished animal companions, and hundreds of pet crematories exist today. I wanted to learn more about the nuts and bolts of the business and was invited to visit PennyLane Pet Cremation Services in Mead, CO. Owner Chuck Myers graciously spent several hours answering questions and showing me around the grounds that house his family's business, explaining the operation and giving me an up-close and personal look at the crematory.

Most animals come from area veterinary practices, and remains are picked up night or day in the company's "pet hearse"—a nondescript black truck with a covered cargo area. After being carefully tagged and recorded in log books to ensure identification throughout the cremation process, cadavers are kept in on-site freezers until their placement in one of two furnaces. Natural gas heats the carcasses to a temperature of at least 1675 degrees for several hours (the time required depends upon an animal's weight), rendering remains to calcified bone. A machine resembling a large coffee bean grinder then pulverizes the bones to "ashes," which can be either returned to owners or commingled and buried with a backhoe on the three-acre property. Myers has cremated everything from livestock and a 260-pound mastiff to a beta fish, and clients can opt for a private (one animal only) cremation or a group/

communal cremation. They are also welcome to observe or participate in the process if they wish.

Because there have been unfortunate incidences of cremation fraud by a few unscrupulous pet crematories in the past, Myers is meticulous about maintaining a transparent business practice. "Each animal is identified and tracked with a metal disk "paw tag" that remains with it throughout the entire cremation process," he says. "I don't want families to wonder, 'How do I know that these ashes belonged to my pet?'"

PennyLane does not offer on-site burial for individual pets, but does provide clients with a small, engraved wooden chest containing their animal's ashes, along with a personalized pawprint made from sculpting clay.

"Fifty Shades of Green"

Although considered "greener" than traditional burial practices, cremation still relies on fossil fuels and releases carbon dioxide, mercury, and other heavy metals into the atmosphere. For this reason the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) strictly regulates the pet cremation business, visiting up to three times per year to ensure that all requirements are met and emissions do not exceed national standards. "PennyLane is way under the EPA requirements," notes Myers. "Our furnaces emit fewer emissions than a new Honda Accord hybrid car."

Besides the potential emission issues, concentrated amounts of cremation ashes (cremains) can be detrimental to the environment. While we like to think that scattering or burying cremains will provide necessary fertilizer for a future tree or shrub, they may actually harm sensitive ecosystems. When a body—human or animal—is reduced to ash,

all water is removed. This significantly raises the pH of the cremains, effectively preventing the release of any beneficial nutrients to the soil. In addition, sodium (salt) is concentrated to levels that are toxic to plant life and prevent seed germination. Because they may damage or modify local ecosystems, some public areas have limited or even prohibit the practice of scattering remains. Denver Pet Cemetery's website, however, still advertises a "Top of the World" ceremony, in which pet cremains can be scattered on the sensitive mountain tundra atop Loveland Pass, west of Denver.

To understand and help mitigate the negative effects of cremains on the environment, Bob Jenkins established Verde Products, Inc., in 2009. VPI has developed a soil amendment product called Let Your Love Grow (or LYLG) to optimize the natural decomposition process, and several natural cemeteries have effectively used it in the US to date. "Cremation strips away the bacteria that naturally exist in the body," says Jenkins. "Our product is an organic compost mixture designed to blend with the cremated ashes to lower the pH and dilute the sodium."

Some companies will blend a small portion of cremains with a planting mix that contains pet-friendly flower seeds, or perhaps a tree. This is a trendy idea that can be problematic—often the seeds or plant material are not native to the area, and may introduce invasive species that can change the dynamics of an entire ecosystem. Native species are well adapted to the local climate and environmental conditions, and often require fewer resources and less water. An avid gardener, Jenkins hopes to eventually teach cemeteries to make their own native compost for natural burials. "Everything would come out of the local community, such as leaf clippings from the cemeteries



Lula burying her pet cat at Eloise Woods

Ellen Macdonald

themselves, to make the compost that would help to decompose the bodies," he says.

LYLG has been endorsed by several natural burial grounds in the US, including Ramsey Creek Preserve, the first green cemetery in the United States. "Bob Jenkins has done a great job," says Kimberly Campbell, who opened the Westminster, SC, burial ground in 1998 with her physician husband, Dr. Billy Campbell. "We know that ashes can change the pH of the soil, and we have used LYLG at Ramsey Creek Preserve for human burials." Ramsey Creek Preserve has always permitted animals to be buried at the site, she says, either with their "families" or in a separate pet section. Campbell estimates 50 pets are buried on the property, including one good-sized horse. "We usually use an 'Alabama backhoe' (a shovel) for digging the graves of smaller pets," says Campbell. "The horse burial required a real backhoe."

A "Purrfect" End

The bond between pet and owner is often stronger than that between family members, notes Coleen Ellis, owner of Two Hearts Pet Loss Center. Following the death of her schnauzer in 2004, Coleen opened Pet Angel Memorial Center, Inc., the nation's first stand-alone funeral home exclusively for pets. She later founded Two Hearts Pet Loss Center, and co-chairs the Pet Loss Professionals Alliance (PLPA) and International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care. Ellis estimates that she has helped over 60,000 customers deal with the loss of their "babies," as she likes to call her charges. "Whoever I work with," she says, "I want them to be able to say, 'The end was perfect.'"

A perfect end is not always inexpensive or environmentally friendly, however. The sky is the limit when it comes to laying Fido or Fluffy to rest, and pet hospices, funeral homes, and cemeteries have all become a lucrative part of a



Ellen Macdonald

Allie burying her cat, Marley, at Eloise Woods

thriving pet industry that earns nearly \$61 billion annually. While cremation remains the preferred disposition method by most clients, pet viewings are becoming more popular, and can cost as much as \$12,000. Embalming is not customary, but professionals will clean and position the bodies and trim nails, and companies often offer a full line of caskets and markers for burial. There are hundreds of memorializing options, from paw/nose print charms to ashes made into diamonds, and urns of nearly every description. “It is all about personalization for clients,” says Ellis. Unfortunately, when non-biodegradable “personalizations” are interred with pets, they may taint the ground forever—much like the metal canister that contains my beloved Patrick.

While there is clearly no lack of burial accoutrements available for deceased pets, more and more families are opting to lessen their pet’s carbon pawprint by choosing natural burial for their animal companions. Eric Greene founded the Green Pet-Burial Society in 2010 and estimates over 500 commercial pet cemeteries now exist in the US—with most favoring underground entombment in styrene plastic caskets—rather than a green burial. “Unfortunately, profit is still the bottom line,” says Greene. “But

consumers are wanting more eco-friendly choices.” These might include such practices as opting for a biodegradable casket or natural-fiber shroud, non-toxic paints or dyes for decoration, avoiding harmful fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, and using a simple native stone as a memorial. Greene says he has received lots of interest about green, conservation pet cemeteries. “A conservation cemetery is not only about finding less environmentally damaging ways to dispose of bodies,” he

says, “but also a way of connecting with the earth, connecting with our heritage, our past, our families, our community. And, of course, connecting with our animals.”

“All Creatures Great and Small, Eloise Woods Welcomes Them All”

Ellen Macdonald laughs when she refers to herself as the “owner/queen” of Eloise Woods Community Natural Burial Park, a green cemetery located ten miles east of Austin, Texas. “I consider myself the queen and guardian of the property,” she says. “I want to provide an option for a simple, affordable, natural return to the earth, and to ensure that it remains a natural setting, (the land) is subject to my rules.” Macdonald purchased the nearly 10-acre

parcel in 2010 specifically for green burials, naming it after her grandmother, Eloise Brown Sutin.

Eloise Woods has no electricity, running water, plumbing, or restrooms, but offers 15 trails that lead visitors through serene, wooded grounds that contain the remains of 156 animals and 132 people. Unlike most other cemeteries, it is permissible to bury pet owners and pets together in one plot at Eloise Woods, and burials are only allowed where they will not degrade the land. Although backhoes may be used in the gravel/sandy loam soil, some families have opted to tackle the difficult task of hand-digging graves themselves. Quilts, canvas slings, or ropes are used to gently lower bodies into 3 to 3.5 foot deep graves—an optimal depth for soil microorganisms and bacteria to effectively break down tissue. One 5’ by 10’ (adult-sized) plot can be purchased for \$2250, and may be used for as many humans/pets as can be accommodated—so long as a one foot buffer remains between plots and between the individual graves within each plot. “If 5000 gerbils will fit, it is okay,” says Macdonald. Smaller, less expensive plots are available for cremains, large dogs (over 20 pounds), or more diminutive pets, and every burial is documented



using GPS coordinates. Grave markers are not required at the natural burial ground, although families may opt for a flat, natural stone smaller than two feet. Macdonald engraves the stones herself.


Many families have opted to scatter, pour, or spread cremains on the property, or they may bury pets in a separate “Rainbow Bridge Garden” if desired. Macdonald has also buried animal remains mixed with Bob Jenkins’ “Let Your Love Grow” soil amendment product. “I think it won’t hurt but will help,” she says.

When asked about the possibility of remains being dug up by scavengers, Macdonald explained, “Some graves may have been pawed at by an armadillo, but animals have generally not been an issue. If they can’t smell something enticing, they won’t dig it up. And we have special ‘critter ridder’ powders containing natural elements that we can put around the grave site to cover decomposition odors.” When visitors have expressed concerns about the possible spread of disease from burials, Macdonald is quick to point out that a dead body is typically quite safe. “Nothing about our bodies is harmful to the environment,” she says. “With the exception of such pathogens like cholera

or Ebola, almost any disease dies with its host.”

Macdonald recalled one particularly sad incident that occurred two years ago while a man was walking his dog near a waterfall in a Texas park. The dog went for a swim, got caught in a whirlpool beneath the falls, and was submerged underwater. The owner jumped into the swirling waters to rescue his pet, and both drowned. They are buried together in a plot at Eloise Woods, united in death.



Yes, our pets do indeed leave their pawprints all over our hearts. By selecting greener after-death options for furry companions, however, we can take solace in knowing that they trotted lightly on the planet. And while sadness is inevitable when we lose a cherished pet, it helps to remember words attributed to Winnie the Pooh: “How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.” 



Mary Reilly-McNellan has been a volunteer editorial assistant with NTM for the past four years. Her interest in environmental conservation has led to a new-found passion for promoting green burial, and she is currently working with a local team of volunteers to bring this sustainable tradition to Boulder.



Marker at Eloise Woods



Sparky's grave marker at Denver Pet Cemetery

Mary Reilly-McNellan

The Art of Dying: What Animals Teach Us

by Gail Pope

Founded in 1990, BrightHaven (brighthaven.org) is a nonprofit animal welfare organization providing rescue, hospice, and holistic education, with an emphasis on senior, disabled, and chronically ill animals. BrightHaven provides leadership in the development and application of animal hospice and its philosophy of care. Founders Gail and Richard Pope have supported over 600 animals through hospice and the dying process. They foster respect and awareness for animals as sentient beings and promote an understanding of death as a natural part of life.

The death of a beloved animal companion is one of the most difficult things we as animal lovers ever face. In my experience, sometimes this loss is more difficult than that of a human family member due to the unconditional love that animals bring into our lives. It is hard to replace the love that is given so freely by beings whose whole purpose is to make us the center of their lives and to teach us about all aspects of life, including death.

Animals likely view us as the inhabitants on this planet most out of sync with the profound wisdom and subtle rhythms of nature. The fact that they love us so deeply, despite our difficulties with natural law, speaks volumes about their devotion to help us become more aware.

Animals approach the end of their lives with the same wisdom and grace with which they live. They are conscious of the value of all stages of life and excel in the ability to live in the moment and find the sacredness in all experiences. Above all else, animals desire to show us the true definition of dignity in the death experience by embracing its sweetness and all of the days leading up to it. Just as preparing for a trip and packing are very important and enjoyable parts of the travel experience

for humans, the stages of finishing life with awareness, preparation, and full choice are important to animals.

Animal communicators often mention that animals share how every minute spent with their beloved people is so precious; they would not wish to deprive themselves of such moments even though they may experience some pain. Pain is of lesser importance to animals, as they do not suffer emotionally with it, but have learned to surrender to it. Perhaps the struggle and misery of pain is something that is uniquely human and separates us from the animals.

We know that animals come to us to teach us life lessons, and I've learned that many of these lessons come in their final days. In various sporting events, the last few minutes before the buzzer often reveal the best of the players and these "last quarter" efforts oftentimes define an athlete's career. The final days of an animal's life may be defining and profound in much the same way.

By savoring death in all its wisdom, we learn about living. It is in the final moments of life that small miracles can happen, thereby changing lives forever. A paw raised to your cheek by one who has not moved for days; a lick of your hand from one who appears to have faded from the physical world: these are sacred vignettes that illuminate the truly important aspects of living life well, all the way to its end.

Nobody is comfortable with euthanizing an animal, let alone allowing an animal to die naturally in his or her own time. Animals do, however, have an incredible ability to show us that they are not afraid of death, and they teach us how to embrace the process with grace and dignity. Death is a slow and gradual process. It is also an orderly progression perfectly designed by Mother Nature, much as the process of birth in reverse.

If you had asked my mother what dignity in dying meant for her, she would have answered that it would be to die in her own time, in her home with loved ones by her side. Nothing was said about how pain would diminish this dignity. In fact, during the final days of her life she remained adamant that she felt no pain.

I know that I am in the minority in putting forth the concept that animals (with some exceptions, of course) are not only prepared to face their own natural death, they actually prefer it. This concept was given to me over and over again by our animals and by my dear friend Vicki Allinson, a wonderfully talented communicator who became my close ally and guide in BrightHaven's early days. Vicki often said, "As we look at approaching animal health in a holistic way, we might wish to extend that definition to the animal's whole life."

Many animals telepathically tell their human companions or animal communicator that it is time to let them go. Maybe this speaks mostly to the necessity of the person to emotionally detach and give the animal permission to leave. Humans seem to carry out this message of detachment by transporting the sick animal to their least favorite place (the vet's office) or by allowing a stranger (the vet) into their home, just at the time when their animal is most intimately involved with their loved ones and with spirit.

My concern with the idea that an animal must be euthanized is that it teaches our children and ourselves that if we are afraid of something, we should just end it so we don't have to face our fear. If a person does decide to let their animal die naturally, albeit hospice assisted, they often face incredible opposition from people who were previously very supportive. Well-meaning veterinarians—who are also trying to

deal with death in an awkward human way—can reinforce this unfortunate situation, perhaps not understanding that death is, in fact, an entire process.

My understanding is that animals do not view euthanasia as a terrible thing and do not judge their beloved people for doing it. They just see a missed opportunity for what they know to be a sacred time ripe with many blessings and wisdom. As death approaches, animals are closer to spirit than they have ever been and are so very happy to share this experience with us. It may be that being together in love with one's beloved is the most important thing.

Of all the people I have counseled who have savored the last natural moments of their animals' lives, none has voiced regrets nor do these individuals usually require ongoing counseling to resolve their feelings. They let go with love and move smoothly and meaningfully through the grieving process and the celebration of that life. Maybe this is what our animal friends wish for us as it allows them to leave, free of difficult emotional attachments, and complete in the knowledge that they have served and taught us well.



Here are some tips for allowing your animals to pass naturally and peacefully:

(These guidelines are written with the assumption that you are consulting with your veterinarian, and they are not intended as medical advice. Any sign of pain in your animal should be immediately addressed with your veterinarian.)

» Consider educating yourself about human hospice care as it is akin to animal hospice care and is all about living life all the way to its natural ending.



Pepper and Oliver

Courtesy BrightHaven

» When you're worried about pain and suffering, look again to the human world of hospice where pain or perceived suffering can be addressed in many ways, embracing both Eastern and Western philosophies.

» Avoid being swayed by a prognosis. Many animals and humans defy these predictions and live remarkably long lives after entering hospice care. As Bernie Siegel once said, "When the spirit rises, all bets are off." I have seen many no-hopers become miracle stories. (Bernie Siegel, MD is an internationally recognized expert in the field of cancer treatment and complementary, holistic medicine.)

» Resist judging quality of life, as this interpretation is based on determining the best time to end a life. You can provide real quality of life by being a companion on the journey with no assumptions and by simply offering the very best possible care.

» Eliminate panic from your mind. Have faith in animals' ability to be in charge of their own dying process. See them as the wise spiritual beings that they are and defer to this wisdom.

» Attend to their needs with an open heart. If you need to nurse your animal, do so with the attitude of a good restaurant waiter: "I am only here to serve." Do not hover, fret, or try to make things different than they are.

» Offer the foods they love; be understanding if they don't eat. Ask for advice from someone experienced in feeding a sick animal.

» Embrace the understanding of being an *anam cara*, or soul friend. In this instance, an *anam cara* becomes a midwife to the dying.

» Sing them their favorite songs, tell them about all the wonderful things they've taught you, and let them know

what things they've done to make you feel special. Share with them what you'll remember and treasure about them when they've gone.

» Consider employing a classical veterinary homeopath to guide you through this journey and recommend an appropriate homeopathic kit, ready for the last stages of life, so you'll have the right remedy on hand in case of need.

» Consider also the gentle support of animal Reiki, flower essences, aromatherapy, sound therapy, and other energy healing modalities.

» Check with your veterinarian regarding subcutaneous fluids, as they can be soothing to the body during hospice. (Your veterinarian or a veterinary technician can teach you how to administer these fluids.)

» Acquaint yourself with the stages of the dying process by learning from someone who has been through it. Many veterinarians have never experienced the natural death of an animal and are unaware of the signs. Recommendation for euthanasia can sometimes come days, weeks, or even years before natural death occurs.

» Refrain from forcing medications and supplements on your pet as a last ditch effort to save them. This may induce stress and give the impression you think their decision to pass on is not a valid one.

» Stick with your normal schedule as much as possible as it is familiar and comforting. They are happy that you are continuing with your life. Take time away for yourself and give them quiet time alone, too.


» If you hear yourself saying, "I can't stand to see them this way!" remind yourself that this event is not about you, it is about them and their life.

» Steer clear of people who are judgmental of your decision to let your animal die a natural death. Instead bless them silently and know that their attitude comes from their own fear of facing death.

» Understand that animals are in control of when they die, and they will die with you if that is what they choose. Sometimes they decide to slip off when they are alone.

» Consider consulting with an animal communicator or other type of counselor who can assist you in staying in a balanced and loving state so that you can make room for little miracles and meaning in the dying experience.

» Know that the absolutely most important thing is to love your dying animals deeply and gently, to respect their decisions, and allow them the pleasure of entering the light from the comfort of your arms.

If you go through this process with courage and grace, I promise that you will no longer fear death, and your perspective on life will be forever changed to one of acceptance and peace. What greater legacy can our animals leave us? 



Courtesy BrightHaven

Gail Pope and Joey

Gail Pope is co-founder and president of BrightHaven in California, and for nearly 30 years she has helped senior and special needs animals on a journey of holistic healing, all the way through hospice care and transition. Gail has an international consultation practice and is contacted by many vets and animal caregivers regarding BrightHaven's natural methods and protocols. She is also the author of five books (available on Amazon) that address various aspects of caring for older animals and animal hospice. brighthaven.org

Bright Haven Sanctuary

After saving animals from desperate situations since 1990, BrightHaven's sanctuary is now in dire need. BrightHaven has launched a fundraising campaign to keep the doors of this unique 27-year-old animal safe haven open at <http://bit.ly/bright-sos>

On Film

Dino the Doberman's Home Funeral

by Rich Matkins

Everyone loves dog videos on Facebook, right? What a great distraction they are. Recently I watched the most amazing video of a dog doing endless dog tasks I thought were impossible! And I thought *our* dog was smart! Now this morning, a Facebook friend posted one entitled, "Goodbye to My Owner" that had me sobbing uncontrollably, as yesterday marked the one-year anniversary of Dino the Doberman's passing.

During my lifetime I've had several losses. Saying goodbye is not easy. After Dino died, I read and spoke to many who admitted how the death of a beloved animal triggered something difficult to understand. Saying goodbye to Dino was much more difficult than the death of my beautiful 90-year-old mother, just nine months earlier. There. I said it.

We decided to have the vet come to the house to euthanize Dino. I realized this process should be a documentary; I needed to film Dino's home funeral because if I can do this for my dog, why not for all human loved ones? I remembered all the beautiful death videos I watched during my Final Passages workshop training with Jerrigrace Lyons. I believed that by creating a short documentary film, my little Dino could help reconnect humans to attending to death at home.

Our ancestors held home funerals long before the corporate funeral industry made it their business. As a small boy growing up in Spencer, SD, I remember my deceased great-grandmother lying in honor in our living room. This seemed so natural. So, using my iPhone, I began filming with the assistance of friends and Johnny the grave digger at White Eagle Cemetery. I was intent on keeping Dino's spirit alive and connecting people who saw the footage to this older, more natural way of caring for the dead.

Shortly after Dino was buried, I was encouraged to create a five-minute film to be shown at a local Portland theater that featured a monthly film on death. Portland has a vibrant and progressive community that is interested in these topics. With Death Cafes being hosted throughout the city and a one-day conference on end-of-life, I knew Dino's message would have an impact. So, my husband Paul and I began the process of editing 47 minutes of film. It was a painful yet healing project for us. Learning new editing software, we worked for days. We grieved as we edited, watching and re-watching our little Dino's story. This film project was all we focused on.

Our house felt so empty without him. With a big, slow-growing, cancerous belly tumor, we knew every day with him was a gift. If Dino wanted a \$3 turkey neck from Hip Hound, his favorite pet shop on NW 23rd Avenue, we seemed to always give in. When I tried to divert his attention from the knee-level bin filled with these dog treats, other shoppers would offer to purchase one for him! Dino knew how to work it. His life was incredibly good right up to the end when he was diagnosed with a severe case of idiopathic vestibular disease.

The short "Dino the Doberman's Home Funeral" was completed in time for the



Dino's wake


Rich Matkins

scheduled showing but never made it to the big screen. I never really understood why. At one time I envisioned a longer documentary as part of our healing journey, but Paul was reluctant, saying that attention spans are only 5 minutes and nobody would watch it. He was complete, yet I wasn't. Today the short version of our loving memorial is posted on YouTube and Facebook. We still share the clip with dog-loving people we meet everywhere.

Our grieving continued as we slowly returned to being a couple without a dog. We revisited Dino's favorite self-guided routes. He had been a master at

seeking out cookies from 16 dog-loving businesses. We wanted to share the sad news that Dino was no longer with us. We tried to hang out with Dino's dog friends, but it was too painful. Suddenly Paul and I felt invisible on the streets of Portland. We were now alone in our grieving. Even our pet-loving friends didn't know what to do or say. Once I was told, "Don't grieve too much." How ridiculous!

I wanted Dino's story and his essence to educate humans about home funerals. After all, I am a retired public school teacher. Birth is embraced with gusto, while death ... not so much. My best little

buddy taught me to be in the moment and to approach everyone openly. I'm convinced that I'm going to be a better home funeral guide because of Dino. An old dog with new tricks is now on YouTube and Facebook forever. 

Rich Matkins is a founding member of the End of Life Collaborative Care (EOLCC) in Portland, OR. His passion for filming continues. He and his husband Paul launched a travel blog called Global Hotel Guys, also on Facebook and YouTube.

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Aiko's Releasing Blanket and Encoffinment Ceremony

by Kateyanne Unullisi

Aiko was a Border Collie/Collie mix born on Orcas Island, WA. My two little girls and I sat on a sunny hillside for weeks with her and her eight puppy brothers and sisters, deciding which one would become ours. Their mother, a sweet and purebred Collie who looked just like Lassie, lay nearby, glad for a short break.

Aiko (EYE ko) means 'Beloved Girl' in Japanese. The real Japanese princess, Aiko, was born a few years after mine. Aiko was the dog of my life. She was wise, kind, silly, and always looking to head off trouble. Aiko would have let me know the minute one of my kids fell down a well and dialed the phone for help if I wasn't home. Mostly, she assigned herself the never-ending duty of keeping the house and surroundings bug-free. Not until she was gone did I have to take care to close doors and screens against flies, ants, and spiders.

Aiko taught me how to be a human being. I had so much to learn. Her patient and exaggerated translations from dog to human finally began to get through. Like any new language, it all started to make sense. Left ear back, eyes down meant 'I disagree' or 'There's a reason this isn't a good idea.' Tiny eye movements, tail position, body language. She wasn't just communicating with me, she was teaching me to listen, to watch. And eventually to understand.

My breakthrough came when I was babysitting a nine-week-old puppy. I was in my favorite chair, knitting, and Aiko and the pup were at my feet. Suddenly, Aiko leapt on the puppy, growling, and 'corrected' her with a nip on the cheek. The puppy screamed and I shouted at Aiko, "No! Not OK! Go lay down!"

As I sat with the puppy on my lap, replaying what had happened, I saw that the puppy had been gnawing on the corner of my book on the coffee

table. A table covered in books (probably knitting books). And that Aiko had deemed this an extreme wrongdoing... why? I looked at it from her point of view, and then I realized that she knew me better than I knew myself. Aiko knew that books were always in my hands, around me, on the walls. And in dogland, taking something that belongs to another could even result in death—it's that big a misdeed. She wasn't angry or impatient with the puppy; she was teaching a strong, important lesson, based on knowing me and my love of books.

I was ashamed for having been harsh with her. I promised her from that moment, I would never scold her again (there simply was never a reason—ever). I would listen and watch and allow her to be my teacher. She knew so much more than I did. She was a better human than I will ever be.

Many years later, her black muzzle began to turn white, and I began to feel the first pangs of pain. How much longer did I have with her? She was 10 when I began to fret. I'd watch her and fight back tears. I started to dread each birthday.

So I did what I often do in times of stress, my form of meditation, knitting. At the time, it was a blanket for her to lay her aging bones on, made from my 'stash.' She was big, so it was big, too. It took a long time, and I intentionally knitted whenever the anxiety and sorrow of losing her came over me. I poured my love into it. I prayed for her health and happiness while I knitted. She lived five more years.

Aiko taught me how to care for an aging and elderly dog. Even though she was 15, nearly blind, deaf and crippled, she helped teach our little Luna how to be a good dog, too. She slept more, on the unfinished blanket, which I now called

her shroud. I knew that all the love I had put into it would go into the ground with her. Here's a note from my journal:

"Outside, the men are digging a grave for my dear Aiko. The men are crying as they work, as good men will. But just a tear here and there.

"They struck a drain, and so had to come and get me to study the grave, which is filling with water. We worked through every option and decided no matter where we put it, it will fill with water.

"So that is what I face as I make all the preparations, to finally lay her in the earth, in the water. I think I will have the vet here next week.

"This morning I finished Aiko's shroud. I plan to sleep on it too, over the next week."



When the vet came to the house, I had given Aiko what I'd promised on her last day: roast beef, hand lotion, and lipstick. She sampled them, politely. She lay on her blanket and I lay beside her on the floor. I had a soft bough from a beautiful, sacred cedar tree she loved to lay under in the yard, and a few coral camellia flowers on the table.

The vet gave us a special gift, which was a powerful pain shot, before the usual two shots (one to relax, and the final heart-stopping one). I had a quiet half hour with her and watched her go back in time. Her ears, tense and pulled back from chronic pain, relaxed and came forward. Her eyes brightened and she smiled. We lay together on the knitted blanket, talking and sharing, while the vet left the house. I kept my sorrow in check, as I wanted to be present for her as she had taught me—in the moment, loving each other. When it was time, and the vet gave the last shot, Aiko and I were staring at each other's eyes. I felt

her 'push' her spirit into my eyes. I was taken aback—I'd never felt anything like that before; it was invasive. And still, it was Aiko, who I could trust with my life, and now, even with my soul. I let her in. She moaned, and died. I could hear the vet crying, and she said, "Some dogs have all the grace in the world."

After she left, I put the cedar and the flowers on her body, and I cried. I'm crying right now, writing this, as the camellias are about to bloom now, five years later.

Friends came over and we carried her, in her knitted blanket, to a table covered in red cloth. I had prepared the room in advance with photographs from her from puppyhood through her last years.

Inspired by the ceremonies in the beautiful Japanese film, *Departures*, we lit candles, played soft music, and took our time brushing her hair. We decorated her with scarves. We tied beads and decorations into her tail. One friend carefully painted her nails, and another put lipstick on her. As we worked together, crying and sharing stories, we whispered into her soft ears how much we loved her. We gave her messages for pets who were on the other side.

When she was ready, we had a proper ceremony, eulogy and all. I asked my friends to call to their sides their own beloved pets, and the room filled with the spirit of cats and dogs. Aiko lay in state for the tribute to the dog of my life. The dog who helped me become a human being.

We wrapped and tied the Releasing Blanket around her, and carried her to her grave. Someone had filled it halfway with cedar boughs, and so the wet bottom was softened with greenery. After the grave was filled, I said, "Let us proceed in peace and yield to The



Aiko in the snow

Kateyanne Unullisi

Mother that which we must yield." It was finished.

No. Never finished. But I know that the reverence and honor we gave to Aiko helped soften the loss. The Releasing Blanket helped prepare me, years in advance. And the memory of her final ceremony is a balm to my memory—the shared love of friends and pet owners, united in acknowledging the depth of our friendships with our dogs and cats.

Now, I share with others my lesson of creating a Releasing Blanket for an aging or ailing pet, to prepare them to lean into what is coming instead of becoming constricted and fearful around it. Knit. Sew. Quilt. Embellished or simple. But take the time to pour your own heart and soul, tears and blessings, into what will go into the grave or to the crematorium with your pet. See it as the soft shroud that will hold your beloved pet wrapped in your love and care. Know that as you make it, you are mindful that it will not be staying with you.

You can find some specifics of how to make your own Releasing Blanket on my blog. I'm collecting images of pet shrouds, Releasing Blankets, and their stories to publish there, too, so please send them to Kateyanne@TheEmergeFoundation. 

*Wa-kon'da,
here needy he stands,
and I am he.*

— Omaha tribal prayer

Kateyanne Unullisi is a Seattle, WA, Funeral Celebrant and Home Funeral Guide. As a board member of the National Home Funeral Alliance, she wants folks to care for their own as much as they are able. As a funeral celebrant, she is known for creating memorials and celebrations of life that help bring healing and connection. Find Kateyanne on Facebook and Twitter.

A Buddhist Funeral for Our Velcro Cat

by Colleen Busch

It was early in the morning, December 2nd, when my husband John woke me. My alarm was set for 4 am—the hour I had to wake for a meditation retreat. But it was only 3. “It’s time,” John said. A hospice volunteer trained in natural funerals, he knows what it looks like when death is near. One look at Eva and I could see it too.

She was a 19-year-old rescue cat with end-stage kidney failure. Blind in one eye, she was not going quietly into that good night. We’d laid her on a towel between us when we went to sleep. Now, she was standing up, making an amazing sound—not a meow but an unequivocal death wowl.

She seemed restless but unable to execute her will to move, so John scooped her up in the towel and set her on the wood floor. We hovered over her, telling her we loved her, stroking her dull charcoal fur, encouraging. In a habitual gesture of caretaking, I ran to get her pain medicine. But as I tried to squirt the Buprenorphine into her mouth, she let out one last cry and then was quiet, utterly still.

We moved Eva to a chair next to the bed. John placed a rubber band around her mouth to keep it closed. We didn’t bother to close her eyes because we knew they wouldn’t stay that way. I fetched an ice pack, a candle, and a small bell.

I slid the ice under Eva’s body and lit the candle. We recited a sutra traditionally chanted in Zen temples when someone dies, then we sat with Eva; we rang the bell 108 times and let our tears come and go.

Eventually we moved Eva up to my office. I took off the rubber band and gave her a bath with a warm washcloth. I had purchased a bouquet of mums, dried oak leaves, some greenery, and spiky purple flowers and we created an altar around Eva with the flower petals

and early camellia blossoms from the backyard. We added her favorite toys and treats, her red collar, a book of William Stafford poems, a photograph of her buddy, an orange tabby named Jai who’d left us two years before. These were the things she’d loved, except for maybe the poetry—that was for us. Stafford’s “Sky” speaks so beautifully to loss and what cannot be lost: “You will bring me / everything when the time comes.”



An altar for our Velcro cat

Colleen Busch

Throughout the day we sat with Eva's body, sometimes together, often alone. Every few hours, we replaced the ice packs with fresh ones. As the hours passed, Eva began to look, as she was, gone. With us no more.

The next day, we packed Eva up, altar and all, nestling everything in a cardboard box. We drove over the Bay Bridge to Colma, where we could have a private cremation. I had the box on my lap—I didn't want to put Eva in the back seat—and every once in a while, I'd pet her and note how cold she was to the touch.

At the crematorium John set her in the oven with everything from the altar—we sent it all with her, including the wool sweater she would have very much liked to knead and drool on. (Eva was compulsively affectionate—such a bottomless pit of need for contact that we nicknamed her “Velcro Girl.”) We chanted the Heart Sutra as the oven roared. Afterward, the attendant swept the ashes out and put them into an urn to hand-grind the larger bones. “Do you want to?” he asked.

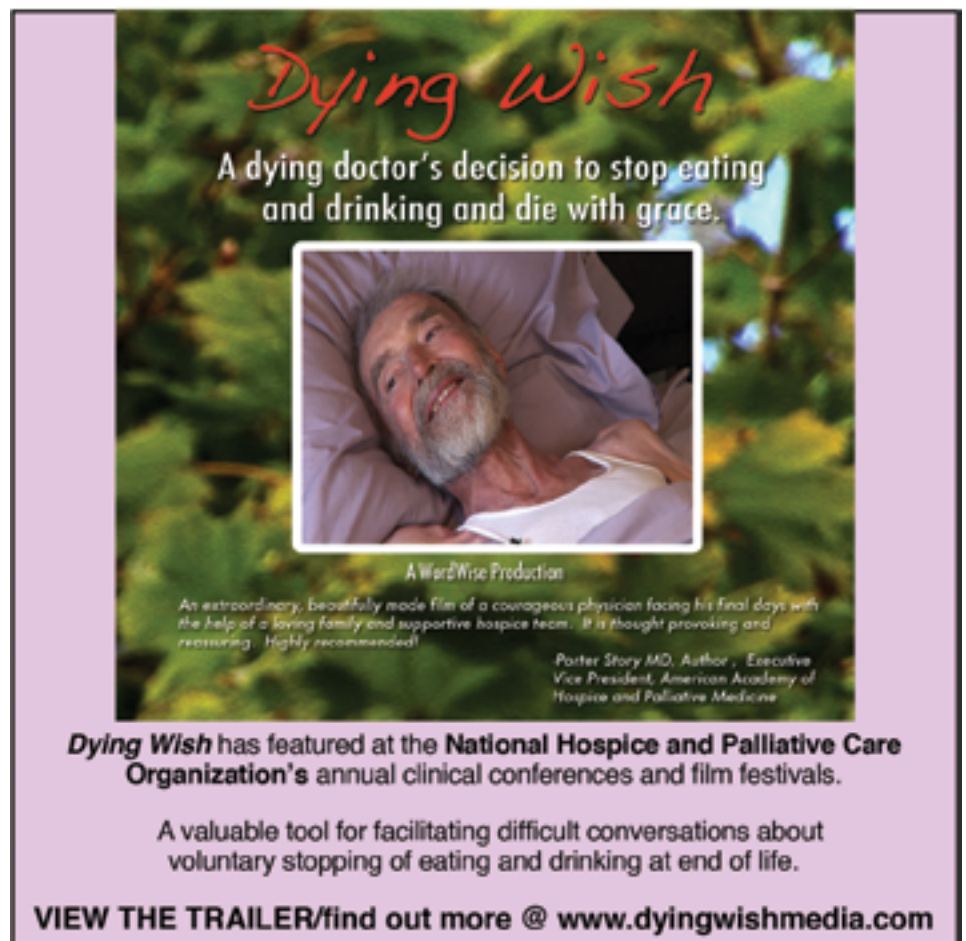
To my surprise, I did. To grind the bones of your beloved cat—who less than 24 hours before lounged on the pine needle-strewn deck, blissed out in the sun—may seem ghoulish. It was anything but. Like washing her body and tenderly arranging it with flowers and toys, it felt natural, the most complete and full-hearted way to honor her life and our connection. To care for her one last time.

I had cared for Eva for three years of worsening kidney disease. I had learned to give her subcutaneous fluids and vitamin B shots. Out of love, I had done everything I could to keep our beloved Velcro Girl alive. Now that she was gone, I wanted to be with her for each step of her transition.

We were lucky. We didn't have to make the hard choice to end Eva's suffering. She made that choice herself. But we did make the conscious decision to participate in Eva's passing, to take an active role in accepting—even embracing—her death. A natural death is a blessing. To this day when I look at the pictures we took of her memorial altar, I feel such gratitude for the love she brought into our lives and the love with which we sent her off. 🌱

Colleen Morton Busch is the author of Fire Monks: Zen Mind Meets Wildfire, about the power of courage coupled with compassion. She is a lay-ordained practitioner of Soto Zen. colleenmortonbusch.com. She also blogs for the Huffington Post huffingtonpost.com/author/colleen-140

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Embracing Death's Journey with Our Animals

by Ella Bittel

It looked like a slight nosebleed, when I picked up my dog Momo from the sitter. But somehow, the red fluid slowly collecting until he licked it off seemed more like precious ink giving me notice that our blessed time together was running out, drop by drop.

I observed my panic kick in and recognized my mind's struggle to, in its educated way, locate anything of value regarding this situation—after all, I am a holistic veterinarian. And yes, that impulse had contributed greatly to Momo's 17 good years in his German Shepherd-sized body—enough of a blessing. Enough?

The days following were filled with attempts to stop the merciless countdown of life force trickling out of Momo's body. Certainly I was grateful for having had all this time with her, and no, I was not going to try holding my loved one back when her time came. But had it come? What was it she wanted?

In my mind I laid out the situation to Momo, wanting her take on whether it was too bothersome to stay in this body, or if she would prefer my help to get well one more time. I received no message that felt like she wanted to be euthanized. Momo died a month later, shortly after her third blood transfusion.

Intellectually I knew I had tried everything. There was no guilt, just a vague sense that in spite of all my actions I may have missed something ...

It took more than a year when it struck me one day—I had overlooked the obvious. In the options I had laid out to Momo, between trying to get her well

or to put her down, I did not give her a third choice: Simply to die in the pace she would on her own, without much interference. In this instant, I knew that was what she had wanted.

How could that happen to me? Way before it had become fashionable, already as a student of veterinary medicine, I had focused on looking at the whole picture. How could I have missed thinking outside the conventional box here, in my own life, with my own companion animal? Why had only the two choices—to treat the animal, or euthanize it “to relieve its suffering”—occurred to me?

It was staggering to fathom the extent of my well-educated ignorance. Nothing in my extensive training had ever covered

how to provide for the special needs of animals dying naturally. Worse, in all those years of education, I had failed to notice this gap in the curriculum. There was neither excuse nor comfort in the next moment's realization that clearly, even inside my profession, I was not the only one unprepared to provide for an animal what hospice provides for people.

Given that our companion animals have become family members to us, surely there would be books out there, and tons of easily accessible information on the Internet. Yes?

Well no, not really. Our focus has been to come up with a thousand different ways to try to keep our animals well and have them live a happy life. Death does not fit in that picture.

But is death that unacceptable? Is it really something we need to protect our animals from by euthanizing them (unless our animal happens to be one of the few who indeed dies in its sleep, as everyone hopes for)? Isn't dying a way to get ready for the great change for all involved—the one transitioning into the realm beyond the physical, and the ones caring for this beloved traveler?

My experience with Momo's passing was a wake up call for me. Since her passing, Animal Hospice has become the passion of my life. Most of the reasons we have for euthanasia would crumble and vanish if exposed to a more encompassing investigation.

How many dogs are put down because of trouble getting up and walking? Would that be the case if people knew how well



Ella with Plouche

Ella Bittel

acupuncture can help that condition? A dog may even be paralyzed behind, yet happy to use a doggie wheel chair to get around.

The animal may refuse food. How often have I heard that sentence “I know it is time (to euthanize, but we skip that word, don’t we?), when my animal stops eating.” Fasting is a natural preparation inside the transition process. From the human field we know that the dying just don’t feel hungry anymore. It’s the wise way of nature—the body knows it can no longer properly digest, plus it won’t be using that fuel provided by nutrition anymore.

The bottom line is this: The physical condition of an animal isn’t all decisive, but rather its internal state.

Does the animal still want to live? Animals are blessed in a way. They don’t compare their current condition to the strength and vitality that was available to them in the past. They don’t look into this gloomy future of never again being able to run around as they used to. They tend to go with the flow of things without questioning them. In fact, they even deal with pain often quite casually. My neighbor’s dog still chases trucks with the same vigor, whether or not his one knee gives him pain to the point that he can’t put weight on it anymore. Even at the end of an animal’s life, being in pain does not automatically equate to no longer wanting to live.

In this as in so many areas, we tend to get lost in our own experience. It often is painful for us to witness our animal friend’s health decline.

Because we are unfamiliar with the natural dying process, we’re not good at prioritizing in the end time of life. Sensing that the essence of our loved one will survive may lessen our grief, but it barely reduces the helplessness we feel

in dealing with practical challenges. Too often, driven by our concerns about letting the animal suffer, our final decisions are made from a state of fear—the least wise of our guides.

Though our society tends to separate the act and fact of dying from everyday reality whenever possible, that is not the case in many of the great traditions, including Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and Shamanism. In these, life is seen as an opportunity to prepare for the great transition called dying. When viewed this way, daily life provides us with many chances to practice letting go. We can learn from such wisdom and not confuse our willingness to let our animal go with having to let it be necessarily euthanized.

If we can just let go of all of our preconceived notions of what a life still worth living ought to look like, of how much time we can afford attending to the dying animal, of how quickly dying ought to be happening—if we can let go of all of that and more, in recognition that all of these concepts have nothing to do with what is best for our animal, THEN we are ready, or at least close to ready to perceiving where the animal is at for itself. And isn’t that what counts?

Caring for the dying is an art, and unless we prepare for it ahead of time, chances are we won’t be up for the task when it is upon us. The experience will seem daunting to us rather than sacred.

Whether the caretaker is aware of it or not, much happens in the last days and hours for a dying human or animal in terms of getting ready internally for the great “change of address.” It is a privilege to wave our loved one off, neither holding it back, nor trying to rush it.

Coming to peace with the real life process of dying—versus some theoretical concept of it or its distorted TV mask—can let us discover its incredibly life enriching value. Animals can teach us about this if we let them, giving us a last priceless gift from the relationship between a person and a companion animal. 🌱



Born in Germany, Ella Bittel followed her childhood desire to “help animals” by becoming a veterinarian.

Specializing in holistic treatment options for animals for over 20 years, Ella lives and works in California. She is certified with IVAS (International Veterinary Acupuncture Association), with AVCA (Animal Veterinary Chiropractic Association), with Linda Tellington-Jones as a TTEAM practitioner, and with Donna Eden, adapting her energy medicine techniques to support animals through their aura and chakras.

Spirits in Transition

Ella has created this weekend seminar, which is designed to give tools to people who want to learn about providing end-of-life care for animals. Offered in the Ashland area in July, the seminar can be brought to wherever someone wishes to host it. Ella can be reached at: spiritsintransition@verizon.net

Making Sense of How Our Pets Die: Reflections of an Animal Communicator

by JoLee Wingerson

Pets are deeply loved members of many human families. When their animals have health issues or are growing old, people sometimes find themselves making difficult decisions regarding their care.

As an animal communicator, I've worked with many families to help people and pets prepare for an animal's passing. I find that, above all else, people simply want their pets to be comfortable and peaceful at the end of their lives. It's their final gift of love to their devoted companions.

Most people also hope that their pets are able to have a natural death, unassisted by a veterinarian's kind presence. Transitioning naturally and peacefully often happens for animals.

Flash

Flash, a cinnamon-colored quarter horse with a white blaze down his nose, had a peaceful, natural death after living in retirement with a family who adored him for 9 years. Before moving to John and Deb Fitzgibbons' home in Boulder, CO, Flash had been a therapy horse for Rocky Mountain Riding Therapy (RMRT), also in Boulder. And before that, he had lived with a family who cherished him as dear friend.

While Flash was still being ridden, he was always as solid as a rock. "Bomb-proof," is what a steady horse like Flash is often called, and these types of horses are invaluable as riding companions. Young kids could even walk safely under his belly.

Rose Fitzgibbons had taken riding lessons at RMRT when she was 7-10 years old to help with a physical disability present since birth. Flash was the stall mate of the mare that Rose rode weekly to help with her balance.

Rose, now 25, trusted Flash completely. "Flash was so easy going around me with all of my disabilities," she said. "He treated me, like, normal. He never ran me over like other horses. He was very sweet and always considerate of my needs."

Once, when her training instructor thought it would be good if Rose overcame her fear of jumping, Flash was chosen as the horse she would ride. Rose dutifully guided Flash toward the jump. At the same time, she was also telling Flash she didn't really want to make the jump. "He listened to me and he stopped right before the jump," Rose said. "He somehow knew I didn't want to do it."

When it was time for Flash to retire from RMRT, Debra and John welcomed him as a companion horse for Lisa, their elderly, uptight mare. They hoped that Flash's calm demeanor would help Lisa relax. Flash fulfilled his responsibility with grace, becoming a trustworthy friend to Lisa.

"My dad was closest to him," Rose said. "They would spend hours together out back. His nickname for Flash was 'Buddy Bud.' Dad gave him cookies and took him to the field where they would listen to music or Dad would read. Flash was always content to be wherever he was."

"Even though he was so clear that he was ready to die, it was hard when he passed on because he had been such a strong presence in all of our lives."

Having been taught many tricks by his original family, Flash was also a bit of a prankster. He could open the back door with his tongue to get inside for his cookies. He also learned to flip open the dog door with his nose. "He drove one of our dogs crazy by always splashing around water from his bucket with his

nose," Rose said. "He also liked to put his alfalfa in a bucket of water and then eat it. We called it Flash's 'alfalfa tea.'"

After a number of years, Lisa died. Two more elderly horses came to live with Flash over the years and also died peacefully at his side.

Horses are able to sleep standing up, however, when they move into a deep sleep, they lie down for about 45 minutes a day. As prey animals, they generally need an outdoor companion (it could be a goat or cow) to watch over them to relax enough to fall into a deep sleep while they are in this vulnerable position.

So after Flash's last companion died, I talked with him about finding another horse or four-legged friend for him. He replied emphatically, and much to my surprise, "NO! I'm tired of being responsible for other horses. It's my turn!"

Even though he expressed himself as clearly as could be, I still had my doubts. But, he relaxed into his new solo life with ease and had no trouble sleeping lying down. He reveled in receiving more attention from his people. And though he grew thinner and weaker, he seemed happy beyond words.

I noticed that instead of a heaviness he always seemed to carry with him, he was more carefree, and even seemed younger than I had ever seen him.

Flash began to sleep so much that another concern arose: If a horse lies down for more than an hour, their lung capacity diminishes greatly. They're simply not built to be in a prone position for long. But Flash would lie down and sleep for half the day! "My mom would go out, thinking he was dying, but she found he was just taking a nap," Rose said.

After about a year on his own, in 2012, Flash died peacefully one night near a memorial sanctuary where many of the Fitzgibbons' pets were buried. Flash had died as he had lived—quietly, calmly, without any drama. He was 32. “It was the end of an era,” Rose said. “We had always had horses. Even though he was so clear that he was ready to die, it was hard when he passed on because he had been such a strong presence in all of our lives. It was like losing any loved one, human or animal.”



Aaron (left) and Dena, touching paws

JoLee Wingerson

It was hardest for John, who had provided most of the daily care for Flash. He felt lost without the routines around the barn. To ease her grieving, Rose focused on schoolwork and making a memorial stone for Flash. When his ashes arrived, John dug a hole in the earth inside the sanctuary and Rose placed the bejeweled stone on top of his grave, along with flowers and a prayer flag.

Aaron

Sometimes animals die suddenly, of natural causes or in an accident. Making sense of an untimely pet death holds its own challenges for people and their grieving process.

Aaron, a 95-pound, five-year-old greyhound, had found his way to a Colorado greyhound rescue organization in 2005. Karen Bordner and Don Ellis chose him as a companion for their sensitive female greyhound, Dena, also 5 years old. Dena had been rescued from the track at two years old and still showed signs of fearfulness.

Karen and Don were among the first people in the country to adopt greyhounds who had been rescued from racetracks in the early 1990s. “The day we picked Aaron up, we stopped by PC’s Pantry (a local Boulder pet store) to buy him a jacket,” Karen said. “It was chilly out and greyhounds don’t have much hair. When we put it on him, he started strutting around the store, wagging his tail, saying ‘Look at me! I’m in a coat!’ I’ll never forget how proud he was of that jacket.” With Karen and Don, whole new worlds opened up for Aaron.

When I communicated to Aaron that Karen and Don were taking a trip and they had arranged for a neighbor to feed and walk him, he responded with disbelief. He was happy and surprised that he and Dena would be so well cared for while his people were away.

Aaron had been eating a low-quality food from a supermarket. Karen and Don cooked him high-quality, well-balanced human food, the same as Dena. Amazed at the gourmet dinners he was now privy to, Aaron became a bit possessive of the source of his meals. “He would body block me when I opened the refrigerator,” Karen said. “He was enormously food-motivated.”

And Aaron wasn’t too

sure about the UPS fellow who made regular deliveries, either. “He went after the poor guy all the time,” Karen said. “He’d race downstairs and slam the storm door.” Soon the UPS guy began to brace against the door after he rang the bell so the door wouldn’t break.

Aaron’s protective nature was fine with Karen and Don. “I had always wanted a Rottweiler, and here he was in this greyhound body,” Karen said.

“When we put it on him, he started strutting around the store, wagging his tail, saying ‘Look at me! I’m in a coat!’ I’ll never forget how proud he was of that jacket.”

Stoic and muscular, Aaron felt responsible for his pack, which included his people. He also became Dena's big brother and protector. They lay together on the floor, paws touching, and snuggled together on the stairway landing. "They were soul mates," Karen said, "and we expected them to grow old together."

When I visited Karen and Don, I often asked Aaron if he wanted an energetic healing, since he seemed to hold a lot of tension in his body from his years of racing. He always politely declined the offer.

About 6 months after he came to live with Karen and Don, they noticed his collar was growing tighter. Their vet said it was because of an injured vertebra in his neck. Surgery was highly recommended. "It wasn't a minor thing, by any means," Don said. "They had no clue what had caused it."

As I communicated with Aaron about the possible surgery, he matter-of-factly asked for two months to heal himself before they considered any medical procedures. Although Karen and Don knew that Aaron was at risk of becoming paralyzed, they reluctantly agreed to his request.

Don researched herbal supplements to reduce the swelling, and Aaron began taking those. During the next two months, Aaron, who usually was hyper-alert, relaxed and began sleeping so soundly that Karen and Don had to wake him to relieve himself.

After 2 months, Karen and Don noticed Aaron was becoming more energetic again. His neck was no longer swollen. When they took him in for an x-ray, it showed his neck had healed completely. Not only had he healed physically, he also seemed to have healed emotionally. He was clearly more cheerful. "He woke up a different dog," Don said. "He was more playful. He was fun."

For the next two years, Aaron and Dena happily slept together, ate together, and ran and played at dog parks together. Then Karen and Don moved into a home with a huge park just beyond their back door. The greyhounds were in heaven. And they became the talk of the neighborhood as they showed off their graceful speed. Aaron seemed the epitome of athleticism and health.

A few months later, after playing in the park with Dena, Aaron lay down to catch his breath, which was unusual. Don thought it was just because of the heat. As he and Karen walked the dogs home, Aaron collapsed. "He didn't lie down," Don said. "He just dropped. And I felt his whole spirit go out of him and through me. I thought immediately he was probably gone."

Don started CPR while Karen brought the car around to race to the emergency vet. Don continued CPR until the vet team took over for another 15–20 minutes, without success. "One of the vets said he probably had a heart defect," Don said.

Stunned, Karen and Don returned home in shock and disbelief. They had never experienced the sudden death of a pet. How could this have happened? What had gone wrong?

The next day at the park, Dena ran and ran in circles and figure 8s, which she never did. They knew she was doing it in honor of Aaron.

A week or so later, after connecting with Aaron as a soul, he communicated that he had completed his path in his body and was called to a higher purpose to work with other dogs. He said he knew his time had been coming. When it happened, he said it felt like a tornado came up and grabbed him. He didn't feel any pain.

Aaron's ashes now sit on a shelf in the kitchen, to honor his love of food, right

beside Dena's ashes. "I know that Aaron was totally on his path," Karen said, "and my responsibility was to not get in the way of it. I think animals make their own decisions, and we're just here to help them with what they want."

Kobi

Though a peaceful, natural death is what most of us wish for our pets, sometimes it's simply not possible.

Kobi, an adorable Australian shepherd fur ball, was welcomed with open arms into Sherri Harrod and Diane Giusti's lives in 1999. The three of them bonded easily as a family. Before they knew it, this puppy had blended into their routines and accompanied Sherri to her Denver office daily. "It's like she was my daughter," Sherri said. "It's true for Diane, too. She was our child."

As Kobi aged, they began to notice a shift in her gait and a lack of strength in her back end. When she was 14, elderly for a dog her size, she was diagnosed with liver cancer, and their vet gave her three months to live.

Diane and Sherri were devastated. They sought out an alternative energy healer, Mikhail (Misha) Jirnov, in Ridgway, CO, and Kobi received regular healings. "Though I couldn't scientifically prove it," Sherri said, "I felt Misha's healing work helped Kobi tremendously." And she held her own, passing through the three-month mark with ease. For the next 18 months, Kobi enjoyed family outings and life continued much as before.

Slowly though, her hindquarters weakened so much that she couldn't walk very well. Diane and Sherri used a harness on her front end like a handle to lift her and help with mobility. Diane fashioned a floating noodle, like the kind kids use to float in the water, to fit under her back legs. Diane and Sherri could then pull up on the noodle to support

Kobi as she walked. "It was a life saver," Sherri said.

When Kobi lost some of her sight to cataracts and her hearing declined, Sherri and Diane responded by attaching pillows to the corners of cabinets and setting nightlights around the house. They also blocked the stairs to the basement with a baby gate.

As Kobi lost more muscle mass and strength, she had trouble getting off the tile floor in the kitchen, her favorite place to rest. Rug runners over the tile helped her gain traction.

Kobi began to lose control of her bladder, and then her bowel movements. Yet Sherri, who was her primary caregiver, was not ready to euthanize her. "I never, ever felt like I could euthanize my pet," Sherri said. "I wondered, 'How can people do that? Why would they do that?'"

Diane had been a pre-med student and assisted with euthanasias. But she didn't wish this ending for dear Kobi either. "I wanted her to die of natural causes, of her own accord."

So to deal with Kobi's bladder issues, Sherri bought a plastic panty with replaceable pads similar to those used for human incontinence at the pet store. It had Velcro and an opening for her tail. Kobi adjusted to all of these changes with ease. Meanwhile, Sherri worried what would happen if they had a medical emergency and were faced with a decision about whether to euthanize Kobi.

With time, something shifted for both Sherri and Diane about euthanasia. "One day I realized that, oh my gosh, it could be the best thing for Kobi," Sherri said. "It was a big transformation for me. After that Diane and I started talking about the possibility and what we would do with her ashes and how upset we were going to be when she was gone."

One snowy, cold February morning, Diane and Sherri woke to a loud yelp from Kobi and bolted out of bed. "You could tell something was wrong," Diane said. When they arrived in the kitchen, Kobi had collapsed on the floor, disoriented and confused. "That minute we knew it was time," Sherri said. "We thought she might be in pain. Even though it was really hard, we knew it was the right thing to do."

Immediately they phoned a vet who made house calls and specialized in home euthanasia. She arrived within an hour and agreed that it was time, saying that Kobi might have had a stroke.

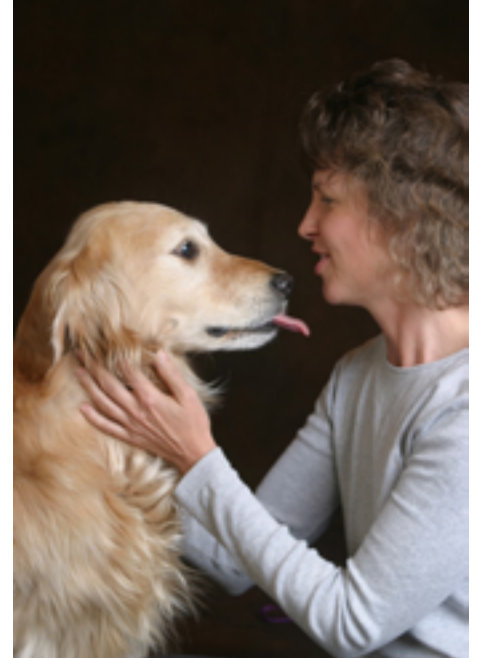
"One day I realized that, oh my gosh, it could be the best thing for Kobi.... It was a big transition for me."

The vet went to her car, as cold as it was, to give Sherri and Diane time and space to say goodbye to Kobi. "She was very good," Diane said, "a good soul to comfort us in our grief. Kobi literally died in our arms. It was very peaceful and smooth. Though initially, we weren't open to euthanasia, we ended up doing it and it was awesome."

Because Sherri had been Kobi's primary caregiver, her death created a huge void in Sherri's life. "Even though caring for her was exhausting, there was such companionship with her. I was very lonely without her. I missed the routine we had shared together for 16 years.

"Kobi always rode in the back seat. It's odd but sometimes I still look for her there.


"Today every time I see an Australian shepherd, or I'm around a dog, I'm like, 'Oh my god, I want another dog!' Yet at the same time it's nice to not have the responsibility. We're not ready for another dog yet."



JoLee and friend

After Kobi's death, to help her heal, Sherri started training for a marathon, something she had never done before. It was helpful for her to spend time outdoors releasing stress. Now she's

run in two marathons. Sherri also found that talking to people about Kobi's death helped. "There are so many people who have been through it," she said. "Recently my brother had to euthanize his poodle, and we cried together on the phone. I tell people it's okay to cry every night into your pillow."

Diane and Sherri say they will adopt another dog when they feel they have the time and energy to devote to the care a dog needs. "I think it's important as a pet owner to be responsible for their care throughout their lives," Diane said. "And as they age, it's important to commit to caring for them just like you would an elderly parent." 

JoLee Wingerson, an animal communicator in Boulder, CO, for 15 years, teaches workshops and a four-month course to train professional animal communicators. She has been featured in Boulder's Daily Camera and on Denver's Channel 7 News. <http://pet-communication.com>

The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide

State-by-State Where, How and Why to Choose Green Burial

Review by Mary Reilly-McNellan

I love exploring cemeteries and have a plethora of books about graveyards on my library shelf to prove it. I don't, however, have one that specifically targets natural burial cemeteries, so I was delighted to learn about Ann Hoffner's new publication, *The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide: State-By-State Where, How and Why to Choose Green Burial*. This handsome, comprehensive guide provides information on everything you ever wanted to

know—and then some—about existing green burial grounds in the US. It is clear that the author spent many, many hours meticulously researching her subject, and the result is a beautiful, full-color, PDF publication that provides information on over 125 cemeteries. The book begins with a vivid description of Hoffner's own experience burying her father at Steelmantown Cemetery, a natural burial ground in southern New Jersey. She recalls how the woods were full of life that day—the sounds of nature, a monarch butterfly flitting by—as her father's unembalmed, shrouded body was lowered into a hand-dug grave. Participating in the burial proved to be a truly soul-expanding experience for the author. "He joined an ecosystem," she writes, "and because he could no longer move, life came to him."

Vibrant wildflowers grace the cover, and images of cemeteries and green burial gravesites throughout the book illustrate the beauty of the woodlands, meadows, and trails found in many natural burial



settings. Hoffner has compiled a wide array of data from online sources, personal communications, interviews, and site visits. Colorful maps assist the reader in targeting regional areas or locating the nearest natural burial grounds. Introductory information about the subject of "green" or "natural" burial is included, as well as an explanation of the natural burial ratings—"hybrid," "natural," or "conservation"—developed by the Green Burial Council (GBC). Because the practice has not yet been completely embraced by the funeral industry, the author has included a helpful section on mortuaries that work with green burial for each region.

The meat of the book, however, is contained in the cemetery entries themselves—color-coded by region and organized by state. An easy-to-read table format has synthesized a great deal of information to help readers better understand what is offered at each natural burial site. All of the basic information is included—location, contact information, website, ownership,

start-up date, GBC certification level (if any), plot purchase and interment costs, natural setting, types of burial containers permitted/available, regulations regarding embalming, grave markers, and burial vaults, whether families can help with grave digging, care and maintenance policies, decoration and memorialization rules, and even pet burial policies.

A notable section of each table is the burial ground's story, and the author has included

all sorts of interesting little tidbits to ponder. For instance, I was amused to learn that, "You don't have to be rich or famous to be buried at Congressional Cemetery. You just have to be dead." And who knew that this final resting place for many notable senators and House members now serves as one of Washington DC's largest off-leash dog parks? Or that some natural burial grounds employ such cutting edge, "walk to site" GPS technologies to locate graves via smartphone? All sorts of compelling informational nuggets can be gleaned from this section.


The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide is also useful to groups or individuals interested in establishing a natural burial ground—it offers the opportunity to learn about potential issues, concerns, and best conservation practices. It was heartening to read, for instance, that some natural burial grounds are embracing such ecological tools as selective weeding of invasive exotic plants, seeding and planting of native stock, controlled burns, and

adding organic matter to soil for land restoration.

As an environmental journalist, Hoffner demonstrates her commitment to greening the environment by making the publication available in PDF file form only. Readers have the option to purchase and download the 303-page book in its entirety or select a PDF file of one of four specific regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, or West)—a great idea for those interested in a limited area of the United States. I don't know about you, but my bookshelves are way too crowded, and I appreciate having the opportunity to save some trees.

Because natural burial is becoming increasingly popular, I was concerned that the book's specific burial ground information/pricing may become quickly outdated. Hoffner addresses this by reminding readers to check in with individual cemeteries for any changes that may have been made since publication. And as they come online, additional natural burial grounds will be added to a future edition. A listing of Canada's green cemeteries will be available later this year.

Whether you are simply interested in learning more about natural burial or have a specific green cemetery that you would like to research, Hoffner's book will provide the answers. She has literally left no stone unturned.

For pricing information or to order a PDF of *The Natural Burial Cemetery Guide*, visit greenburialnaturally.org. 

Our Pet's Funeral Pyre


by David Ford



Our lab, Abby's winter cremation ceremony

David Ford

I have been interested in the East for a long time, especially India. Cremation is very much a part of lives there and it looks to me like a great way to send off those whom we love. We had a Lab, Chelsea, who was very much a part of our family and whom we loved dearly. When she passed, we wanted to do something special, so we decided to cremate her in the open air. It was a learning experience, and the work of cutting and stacking the wood and tending the fire helped us to say goodbye with prayers for guidance and grace.

Since Chelsea's passing years ago, we have cremated two other dogs and a cat. I'm not as enthusiastic these days about cremating pets, but if there is a not a fire ban, I'll probably continue the tradition. We live in a forest, and the wood we burn is all from fire mitigation work that reduces the risk of a major fire. It is important to consider the risk of spreading a fire with any open-air pet cremation. 

David Ford lives in rural Colorado.

6th NHFA Conference: Advocating for Home Funerals Stepping It up a Notch

by Lee Webster, President NHFA

The Pearlstone Center
Reisterstown, Maryland
September 22-24, 2017

Come one, come all to this year's biennial conference! We have a full line-up of panels, films, skills sessions, and activities to interest anyone dedicated to spreading the word about home funerals. We've incorporated extra time and opportunities to meet with others, enjoy meals and conversation, and to learn more about:

- ◇ how to tell effective and moving home funeral stories
- ◇ how to handle body care basics
- ◇ how to have home funerals for pets
- ◇ building bridges with hospices and hospitals; working with funeral directors, vital statistics, medical examiners
- ◇ how to take care of yourself while helping others
- ◇ legal issues that inform home funeral advocacy
- ◇ how to create ceremonies for home vigils, funerals, and memorials; plus film showings of *In the Parlor* with filmmaker Heidi Boucher and *Zen and the Art of Dying* with Zenith Virago
- ◇ altar art
- ◇ our own one-of-a-kind silent auction
- ◇ a "Before I Die" wall
- ◇ evening bonfires
- ◇ and so much more!

Early registration lasts till August 15. Be sure to register AND make your reservations at The Pearlstone Center by going online at <http://homefuneralalliance.org/events/conference-2017>—just follow the links! Hope to see you there!

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Photo courtesy of Marion Spadone

National Home Funeral Alliance 2017 CONFERENCE

Join your home funeral community
to learn skills, share stories, and connect
with others to advocate in your local
hospice and communities.

September 22-24, 2017
Reisterstown, Maryland
(one hour from DC)

www.HomeFuneralAlliance.org



In Other News

The newest NHFA publication offers advocacy information about working with hospices, hospitals, and care facilities in making sure that services will be there when they are needed. You can find *Building Bridges Across the Death Care Continuum* on the NHFA website or directly on Amazon. All proceeds from sales support home funeral education.

The free NHFA information card is now available in English and Spanish! It's easy to order and a great piece to spread around in churches, doctor's offices, community events, and anywhere else people gather who might need to know about the benefits of home funerals.



Caitlin Doughty, NHFA 2015 conference book signing

Karen van Vuuren

For the first time, the NHFA sponsored a well-attended four-night series of conference calls. Keeping Home Funerals Alive! kicked off with a Day of the Dead celebration on November

1st. The series was offered concurrently with the first successful fundraising campaign, setting the stage for giving and receiving to support the mission in the future. [f](#)

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NHFA Products

The updated "Restoring Families' Rights to Choose," the white paper jointly written with the Funeral Consumer Alliance, has been made available at Buy One, Get One Free through a generous gift from Bryan Morse, a fire and law enforcement chaplain in California, NHFA member, and ardent supporter of the home funeral and green burial movement. To get your free copies, go to NHFA Products.

In another reprint and update, Donna Belk has revived the home funeral how-to booklet *Undertaken with Love*. There is lots of new material in this beautifully illustrated guidebook, originally written by Donna and Holly Stevens. This is also available on the NHFA website or directly on Amazon.

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How Writing Healed My Heart

by Gin Mackey

I recently published a mystery entitled *Disappear Our Dead*, a novel featuring a home funeral guide who is an amateur sleuth. All the writing I have done before led up to this book, but I didn't know it at the time. *Disappear Our Dead* is a book of my heart, 50 years in the making; but what began as a journey to write a book became a journey of healing my own deep and unfinished grief.

When I was 17, my mother left our house to go to her bowling league and never came home. She was involved in a catastrophic car accident and died immediately of a fractured skull. She was 45 years old.

I still remember the moment my father returned from the hospital and told us God had taken Mommy to heaven: I had backed away from him, shaking my head, saying, "No, no, no," in a desperate, futile effort to deny the truth.

My mother left behind my father, my two older sisters, my younger sister, and my only brother, Frankie, who was 9 at the time. When tragedy strikes some families, they pull together; others fall apart. Mine fell apart. We kids didn't know how to grieve, and my father didn't know how to help us. Nine years later, my brother died, also in a car accident. But his life had started to disintegrate the day mommy died. That's how I learned about loss, and heartbreak.

After the accident that took her life, the next time I saw my mother she was in her casket, all made up and looking good. My sister Renee said through her tears, "She looks like she could get up and walk." Renee was right. My last memory of my dead mother is her looking alive. It didn't help me come to terms with her death.

My grief was complex, uncontrollable, and confusing, and it hurt. I had no idea of the long-term toll it would take on my life.



My mother shortly after World War II

When my mother died, I looked for someone to blame. I hated God for taking her. We were Catholics back then, but my mother hadn't been attending Mass, and I turned away from the Church that I believed consigned my mother's soul to hell for eternity for her sins. I didn't attend church for more than a decade, and when I finally sought a spiritual home, I looked for one I thought was the antithesis of what I'd experienced as the strict dogma of the Catholic church; I became a Unitarian Universalist, which I felt allowed room for my continuing confusion.

I blamed my father for not being a better husband. My father was the authoritarian voice in our family, a man easily displeased, a man I barely knew. I thought God might have made a giant mistake, simply taking the wrong parent. I blamed myself for not being a better kid.

My two older sisters were already living on their own when my mother died, so I was the oldest child at home. When my friends were trying out for cheerleading

and planning where they would go away to college, I was grocery shopping, making meals, and taking care of my little brother.

My father's role had always been to go to work and pay the bills; he continued to do what he'd always done. Dealing with us kids was something he was not prepared for. We never talked about our feelings at home, and we certainly never talked about our dead mother. When he arrived home from work, my father would talk to me as he had my mother, about his day. But I wasn't his wife. When my friends all left for college, I stayed home and commuted to a nearby college. Home felt like a jail, a sentence that would never end. I thought I would always have to take care of my father and the house. It impacted my view on marriage and kids; I saw them as a trap, burdens from which a woman could never escape. I made a vow I didn't know I was making: Never get myself into that situation. I didn't marry until I was 49.

I began to drink. Not a glass of wine, but tumblers of gin from bottles I hid in my closet. I didn't think my father knew. He did. Instead of talking to me about it, he simply said one day, "It's time for you to leave," jettisoning me like flotsam.

I spent years drunk. I remain immensely grateful I survived those years. I didn't know that I was trying to numb the hurt. I got very good at pushing people away using biting sarcasm. I'd use any reason I could latch onto to reject people so I could avoid getting to know them better. I didn't realize I was doing it to save myself from what I was terrified would be more hurt if I cared for someone and lost them too. When I finally fell in love 9 years after my mother died, I had horrible daymares of my boyfriend's dying in a fiery crash, daymares that were vivid and terrifying. Luckily for me, he didn't die, and his love helped me begin the climb out of the abyss.



Mommy, Frankie and my father

Decades after my mother died, I heard about something called a home funeral. A woman named Beth Knox was giving a workshop in Cambridge, MA. Many of you know Beth's story. She created an organization called Crossings after her young daughter died, and she found a way to bring her daughter's body home from the hospital, to wash and dress her, and invite friends and family to come to her home to grieve.

I'd never heard of such a thing. I was astounded that there could be such a different way of dealing with death. I signed up for the workshop. Beth told us her story, and we took part in a mock home funeral, one participant playing the part of the deceased, and others of us washing and caring for her.

It was a revelation to me, that after-death care for a loved one could be so personal, so reverent, so loving, so open, such a wonderful way to say good-bye and begin to grieve. I saw so clearly that the way my family had handled the passings of my mother and brother was not the only way.

It planted a seed in my brain. I wanted everyone to know about home funerals. I wanted to walk up to complete strangers and say, "Can I tell you about home funerals? This is really important." Luckily, I realized that accosting strangers on the street might not be the best approach to getting the message out.

But I loved to write, and I loved to write mysteries, and eventually I started to wonder if I could bring together my love of mysteries with what I had learned about home funerals. And I started to wonder, why couldn't an amateur sleuth in a mystery be a home funeral guide?

I also knew that I wanted the book to be about loss and grief and learning to live again. It was a tricky balancing act to get

this all into one book. If it's a mystery, of course there has to be a murder, and lots of scenes leading to the uncovering of the bad guy. Eventually I wove all these threads together in *Disappear Our Dead*. The title stems from something I read as I researched the book, about the discomfort many of us have in this culture with death and dying and perhaps especially a dead body: we try to disappear our dead. Here's the description of how it all came together:

When the worst happens, would you rise or fall...

On the coast of Maine, a devastating death, a widow grappling with grief. Then, a second chance at life. This is Abby Tiernan's story, a story of the heart. But in order to learn to live again, Abby must solve a troubling mystery.

After the death of her beloved husband, Abby hits bottom—hard. Her flickering will to live reignites when she becomes a home funeral guide, teaching the bereaved the age-old tradition of after-death care

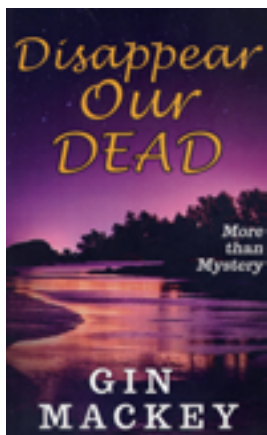
for loved ones at home. But disturbing questions arise over the death of a woman whose home funeral Abby guided. Was the death really natural? The police chief refuses to investigate what appear to be unfounded concerns of a distraught relative.

Members of the community, mystified by home funerals, target Abby as a suspect, and swirling rumors threaten to destroy her fledgling business and fragile spirit. Abby discovers a funeral home director and a caterer who bleed red ink when people choose home funerals, money-hungry motivation to set up Abby as a murderer. And what about the long-suffering husband? Was he ready to move on with his life before his wife was ready to die?

To save her failing business, and with the help of a widower detective she feels guiltily drawn to—Abby must uncover the truth. As she unmask the murderer, and the killer sets sights on her, Abby realizes there's one thing she wants more than anything—to live.

Understanding how all the threads could weave together was one thing; writing the book was another. It was very important to me to write about home funerals in a way that was realistic. I knew many people would still be unfamiliar with them. I wanted readers to know that a home funeral is a real alternative in caring for their loved ones after death.

I turned to the Crossings network to ask if any home funeral guides would be willing to be interviewed. Seven home funeral guides and other experts in after-death care generously spent hours on the phone with me so I could be sure to get the home funeral details correct in my book. That made a huge difference and helped propel me forward. I also interviewed a police chief in an effort



to make sure I got the police details right, and medical people to ensure the medical parts were correct.

The book took me longer to write than I'd anticipated. As a writer, you never really

know what's going to come up when you sit down to put words on the page. I didn't know the tears I'd have to shed to write the book. I didn't realize how much grieving I still had to do. And I didn't know the book was going to help me do it.

As I wrote about characters and the grief they were experiencing, I felt grief too. I would find myself at my desk, sobbing as I wrote. As I shed tears, I knew I was finally feeling some of the deep grief I had never before been able to feel about my mother's and my brother's deaths. Somehow, I could feel through my characters.

At one point during the writing of the book, I was in a TJ Maxx when I came across a porcelain figurine. She had auburn hair and was dressed in a flowing white gown freckled with shamrocks. She immediately reminded me of my Irish mother, whose name had been Mary Ellen Rose Duggan. This figurine had wings of soft white feathers, and her arms were stretched out toward me—a hug waiting to happen. I brought the angel home, perched her on the top of a tall bookcase next to my writing desk, and positioned her so she was looking over me. She was my mother in spirit form, an angel at my shoulder, a comforting presence urging me to use my passion and my words to help spread the word on home funerals and grief and loss and learning to live again.

I could have written the book in a way that kept difficult emotions off the page. I chose not to do that. Meryl Streep ended a speech recently with a quote from Carrie Fisher: "Take your broken heart, make it into art." And that's what I tried to do. I like to think my mother would be proud of what I've done. *Disappear Our Dead* is dedicated to her, a woman who never had a chance to live out her years. I wrote it to honor her short life.

I thought that the writing of *Disappear Our Dead* was the hard part. It was, but it turned out it wasn't the only hurdle. Once the book was written, I began contacting agents in the hopes of getting the book published through traditional channels. One of them told me the book was so moving she was going through Kleenex at a pretty rapid rate as she read the first 50 pages. There are conventions readers expect you to meet in genre fiction, and *Disappear Our Dead* did not conform as closely as she wanted to a genre mystery. There has to be a dead body pretty quickly, and the focus of the book is resolving that murder. Other agents also liked the book, but felt the same and suggested changes I could make to more closely adhere to conventions.

But my book was always meant to be Abby Tiernan's story, a story of grief and recovery, a story of a woman finding meaning in being a home funeral guide, and working to solve a murder that threatened her ability to help people learn about home funerals. To do what agents wanted would mean ripping the heart out of the story. I couldn't do it, so I made the decision to self-publish *Disappear Our Dead*.

But now I had a new problem. If agents were right, readers expecting a conventional mystery might be disappointed. I realized that, what agents had seen as a weakness of the book, I had always seen as its greatest *strength*. But I had to find a way to convey this to readers.

Finally, I came up with the tag line, *More Than Mystery*. These three words—positioned on the cover under the title—along with the back cover description, would let readers know that what was in the book was not typical. I also added a short quote from a Kirkus Review on the cover: "Goes beyond a cozy, small-town mystery to deal with some immense and difficult issues." They could then choose to read it or not, but they would know what they were getting. I was taking a chance that readers would agree they were getting more than mystery.

Self-publishing required a lot of new skills to produce a high-quality book. I had to learn how to create an attractive cover, format the interior, deal with ISBNs and bar codes... But that hurdle was pretty close to the ground compared to the next one I faced: marketing.

For someone who loves sitting alone in a room tapping words into a computer, my response to the idea of marketing could pretty much be summed up in two words: *fear* and *loathing*. But when you self-publish, the marketing falls on your shoulders. If I didn't market the book, no one would know *Disappear Our Dead* even existed.

But *Disappear Our Dead* still had a lot to teach me, and I never could have envisioned how different marketing would turn out to be from what I feared. I realized I had a natural audience stemming from the advance work I'd done interviewing home funeral guides and getting to know about organizations such as the Funeral Consumers Alliance and the National Home Funeral Alliance. Books in hand, I attended a meeting of the FCA in Maine and donated books to the organization. I also contacted the home funeral guides and others I'd interviewed and sent them copies of the book.

Within days, I began receiving wonderfully positive feedback from these readers. One woman told me she

read the book in one sitting because she couldn't put it down. That in itself buoyed me enormously, and a funny thing happened. Hearing directly from readers about how much they enjoyed the book made marketing so much easier. This direct feedback made it clearer than anything else that people saw real value in the book. Some wrote reviews on Amazon. Some told me they were contacting friends across the country to suggest they buy the book. Within weeks, copies of *Disappear Our Dead* were in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Ohio, Texas, Arizona, New York, Maryland, Michigan, Colorado, Wisconsin and Minnesota. I loved thinking of people in all those states reading the story of a home funeral guide sleuth.

Then something even more unexpected happened when a Unitarian Universalist church I attended occasionally asked me to talk to a women's group. As the day approached, I made voluminous speaking notes as my nervousness about talking in front of a group grew. But another surprise awaited me at this meeting.

The organizer had asked me to talk about how I came to write *Disappear Our Dead*. I began to tell the group about my mother, the car crash that took her life, my seeing her embalmed and in a casket, my grief, and home funerals. And as I talked about these things to this group of twenty women, I started to speak not from my notes but from my heart. And the group started to listen with their hearts. I could feel they were with me in a way I hadn't envisioned any group would be.


There isn't anyone whose heart hasn't been broken at some time in life. I found that when I spoke from my heart and shared my story, it touched people. After the meeting, and again after women read the book, they told me stories of loved ones they'd lost and their own experiences in saying good-bye. These

heartfelt connections with readers have been a touching surprise.

These days, when I think about my mother and my brother, I do so with love and affection, my sorrow tempered by all I've experienced.

My father died a couple of years ago, at the age of 91. He'd lived more than twice as long as my mother. There's so much I'll never understand about how the world works, but now I feel more acceptance of that simple truth.

I'm grateful for all *Disappear Our Dead* has taught me. I know I have much more to learn. When it comes to end of life matters, there is so much more for us all to talk about. If enough readers enjoy *Disappear Our Dead*, I hope to write a continuing series with Abby Tiernan as the home funeral sleuth. I can already envision a scene in the next book: Abby and her handsome detective friend sit down together and talk through their last wishes. I can envision a family Abby is working with in which an elderly member is ending her life via VSED (voluntary stopping eating and drinking). I'll want to include a scene in which someone close to death is struggling to learn how to die.

My hope is that the more my characters can confront and deal with difficult end of life issues, the more readers will consider the possibility that they can, too. And I hope my readers will find a little healing for themselves along with my characters. 



Gin Mackey is the author of Disappear Our Dead, a midcoast Maine mystery, and Suddenly Spying, a madcap caper. She lives and writes in Owls Head, ME. ginmackey.com.

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Tomorrow Never Knows

by Darci Meyers

With a diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's Disease, mathematician, activist, and transgender person, Shar Jones, chose to die as consciously as he had lived.

I was sitting with Shar on a gloomy, winter morning, and listened as he talked about his life; his wit and sense of humor often sparked laughter. I had been getting to know Shar and his wife Cynthia over the past several months, and the more time I spent with them, the more curious and inspired I felt. There was just something about Shar...his guileless smile, the spark of intelligence and mischief in his eyes, his warrior spirit. Everything about him intrigued me.

Shar and Cynthia were referred to me because they were looking for a Buddhist chaplain and psychotherapist to help them navigate Shar's end-of-life journey. Shar had been diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease. He and Cynthia were acutely aware of the trajectory of the disease and its dehumanizing impact. Although he was still very present, connected to a solid sense of self and still remembering his wife, he had already lost the capacity to do routine daily activities, such as driving, making meals and even finding light switches. Shar had been a brilliant mathematician who had worked for the federal government, often on classified assignments. He was also a Buddhist meditation practitioner, so his mind was really important to him. This kind of loss was particularly devastating.

During my first meeting with Shar, he was adamant: "I know what this disease does. I will not let it destroy me. I want to die consciously." He described how important his Buddhist meditation practice was to him, and he wanted to be clear-minded upon death. I knew he had given this a lot of thought and contemplation. His resolve was evident

and gave me the confidence to support him in his wish. In our weekly sessions we began to explore what it might look like for him to die consciously and the choices he would ultimately need to make.

I learned many things in our time together. Shar deeply loved music and the natural world. He still hiked weekly, and we would often listen to some of his more than 5000 songs on his iPod. He was always inspiring and full of life, giving me glimpses and insights into his personal story with honesty and grace. An activist at heart, he always stood up for the marginalized and disenfranchised; for example, he started a union at work against strong opposition and attempts at coercion. Shar was transgender: born a man, but always feeling in-between genders. He finally came out late in life and began living as a woman with Cynthia's encouragement and support. He told me often that he never could have done it without her.

I just want to note that I'm using the male pronoun here because, toward the end of his life, Shar purposely presented more as a man in public, even though he often described himself as gender-queer or gender-fluid and really could not be confined to a label. He was acutely aware that he was compromised as a result of the Alzheimer's disease and perhaps would not be able to respond, in a manner he would like, to the violence that transgender people often encounter in the world.¹ As a mathematician, Shar knew these statistics well, and as a consequence, he wanted to protect both himself and his wife.

When Shar eventually came out at work, he was met with blatant discrimination and hatred, but true to his warrior spirit, he did not waver: he went up the chain of command to get the support of human resources at the national level.

He organized and led a successful and mandatory pride day educational event for all employees, to the chagrin of his superiors. I cannot imagine the courage it took to show up every day.

Shar, with Cynthia's unwavering support, made the conscious decision to stop eating and drinking—the only legal option available to him—on August 19, 2016. He died with his wife by his side on September 1. I am deeply touched by the profound love Shar and Cynthia had for each other. Cynthia provided the momentum and tenacity behind manifesting all that was required to support Shar on his end-of-life journey. Her ability to love beyond boundaries is an inspiration to everyone who meets her. She is one of the strongest, most compassionate people I have ever known. Their love story is profound. It's a story of respect and connection, solidarity in the face of discrimination and hatred, and love in the face of death. They both faced the reality of death with unbelievable grace. Talking about death became as normal for them as discussing what they might have for dinner.

Discussing inevitable death in a frank and open manner is often a taboo in our culture; it can certainly elicit fear and reveal many misconceptions. As Craig Bowron, hospital-based internist in Minneapolis, wrote in a Washington Post article, "This denial of death can distance people from the real, moment-to-moment experience of being vibrantly mortal—of really feeling things, really loving others and showing it, really seeing the world around us and really speaking our minds with courage and acting on our core beliefs."² Shar and Cynthia's life together demonstrated their love and how they lived their core beliefs. I believe their example can inspire us all to transcend our fear of death so we can really show up in life, in love, and in relationships in a deeply meaningful way.



The many-faceted personality of Shar Jones

Shar often talked about his wish that his life, and the manner in which he chose to leave it, might in some way offer support and inspiration to others facing similar circumstances. The Alzheimer's Foundation of America estimates that as many as 5.1 million Americans may now have Alzheimer's disease and that number is on the rise in an aging population. Current research from the National Institute on Aging indicates that the prevalence of Alzheimer's disease doubles every five years beyond age 65.³

Taking Shar's hopes and dreams to heart and feeling inspired to help him manifest everything that was important to him, I had a secret wish that someone would make a film about his life, his choices, and his death. Not knowing about my feelings and of her own accord, Cynthia approached me about the possibility. I was taken aback, yet somehow felt called to help make Shar's vision a reality. The project immediately seemed to take on a life of its own.

When I met filmmaker Adam Sekuler through a series of serendipitous connections, I invited him in on the project. Adam has 15 years' experience working in the film exhibition

community, and his films have screened at festivals from Rotterdam to Portland, at museums including the Walker Art Center, and in art houses across the globe. He immediately grasped the scope of the project, connected with Shar and Cynthia and we were off! We began filming in September 2015—a year before Shar's death. Adam and I will be forever grateful for this opportunity to share in their journey and are deeply touched by their courage and love. We hope others will be, too.

Adam spoke about the project's impact on him, "There's a sincerity, and profound truth that I learned about living and dying by bearing witness to Shar's story. Alzheimer's destroys one's relevance, and there's a profound sadness that comes with losing that to this disease. This film is about the difficulty of accepting that, the processing, coping, and living with that reality as it becomes increasingly a part of Cynthia and

Shar's lives. It's also about their visible courage in the face of so much difficulty and their seemingly endless supply of love. They showed tremendous strength as Shar approached his death. Ultimately the film is a testament to

Shar and Cynthia's remarkable story and to the honesty with which they engaged in his life and his death."

We are currently in the post-production process, and distribution will follow. We plan to submit the film to local, national, and international film festivals, as well as offering the film for educational purposes. If you'd like to learn more about the film or the process of showing it in your community, please visit our website at: tomorrowneverknowsfilm.com. 

ENDNOTES

1 Discrimination and violence against transgender people is higher than in any other population. A report by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) reported that the majority of victims of hate violence homicides in 2013 were transgender women at 72%. Transgender people are also more likely to experience police violence and physical violence from law enforcement, and transgender women particularly are more likely to experience sexual violence. http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/ncavp_transhvfactsheet.pdf

2 Craig Bowron, hospital-based internist in Minneapolis in a *Washington Post Article*—https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/our-unrealistic-views-of-death-through-a-doctors-eyes/2012/01/31/gIQAeaHpJR_story.html

3 http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/ncavp_transhvfactsheet.pdf

Darci Meyers, MA, is a psychotherapist and spiritual director in private practice in Colorado. She has worked in end-of-life care for over 15 years and uses meditation and mindfulness as a core practice in her work. darcimeyers.com



Tomorrow Never Knows/Adam Sekuler

Shar and Cynthia - dying time



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We Give Thanks for the Animals

A Meditation
by Gary Kowalski

We give thanks for the animals
Who live close to nature,
Who remind us of the sanctities of birth and death,
Who do not trouble their lives with foreboding or grief,
Who let go each moment as it passes,
And accept each new one as it comes
With serenity and grace.
Enable us to walk in beauty as they do
At one with the turning seasons,
Welcoming the sunrise and at peace with sunset.
And as we hallow the memory of good friends now departed,
Who loved abundantly and in their time were loved,
Who freely gave us their affection and loyalty.
Let us not be anxious for tomorrow
But ask only that kindness and gratitude fill our hearts,
Day by day, into the passing years.

Magellan

14" x 19"
Watercolor and Ink on Bamboo Paper
by Christine Pateros

*Commissioned in honor of Magellan,
beloved dog and companion for 12 years.
Adopted from a shelter at difficult time
in the owner's life and transitioned in
his loving arms. christinepateros.com*

*Reverend Gary Kowalski is the author
of Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom for
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Katmandu on the Other Side

*My Beloved, I held him tightly in my arms
as he coiled and burst forth
like a summer seed
Into the fullness of his fruit.
I will tell you, he did not die
he lifted like a martial artist from his body,
great master of the art of soul
He did not die, I can tell you
because he did not die
in my arms,
He flew right through me
when he passed.*

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