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## THE DISPARAGED GRIEF: Pet loss and 20 years of 'fighting the good fight'

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*...The beloved pet must have its life terminated by the one person who loves it most.  
 This is both an irony of fate and extreme act of love  
 and this emotional strain is like nothing else...*

– Wallace Sife, PhD

*O heaven will not ever  
 Heaven be  
 Unless my cats are there  
 To welcome me.*

– Epitaph in a pet cemetery

Having led pet loss support groups since 1986, in addition to having to euthanize three of my dogs - one just last month – I appreciate and approach this subject both in a clinical as well as a personal manner. I have been greatly concerned about the responses of people to the loss of pets. What flabbergasts me the most is the continuing disparaging, discounting and potentially destructive comments made by both well-meaning and misguided people to the person mourning his or her beloved pet. As a culture or society, we seemed to have actually gone backwards in our empathy and understanding of the human/animal companion bond and the normal and real pain of grief that occurs when that bond is irrevocably broken.

For example, many of my grief therapy clients who have lost a spouse to cancer, report being utterly devastated and aghast when relatives and friends tell them they could always remarry again, or that they should be glad that they had so many happy years together, or that their deceased spouse would want them to be strong during their time of grief. The same sorts of awkwardness and insensitivities often arise in consoling people over the loss of their pets. Many times, the people who make these statements are acting out of love and only wish to dampen the pain they see in their relative or friend following the death of their pet. Other times, there may be even more derogatory statements, such as, "it was only a pet, get over it," made by those who view people grieving the loss of a pet as foolish or histrionic. In either case, all that these statements do is to further enrage and depress people who are already dealing with the painful loss of the death or their spouses. In a sense, it creates a double-whammy for my grief clients; not only do these bereaved individuals feel sadness and pain over their loss, but now they feel guilty and angry at themselves for how they are feeling.

As I have written previously in my three books (Dogs on The Couch, Cats on the Counter and Birds off the Perch), the death of a pet is no less real than the death of a person. Pet owners go through similar

bereavement reactions as people who are mourning the loss of family member or friend go through. It is my experience as a therapist that one of the most devastating losses a person can experience is the death of a spouse or a child. This is illustrated by the fact that the top ranking stressful event on the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Scale is the death spouse (scoring 100 stress points) followed by divorce and marital separation from a mate. This is also echoed by a study from Harvard Medical School cited in the April/May 2006 edition of *Scientific American Mind* that found that a wife's death in a 30 day period increased her husband's risk of death by 53%, and conversely, for a surviving wife, her husband's death in a previous 30-day period increased her risk of dying by 61%. Therefore, because of our pets' dependency and innocence – which symbolically and emotionally resemble the roles that children take in families, it is quite understandable that the surviving pet owner will experience many of the same emotions and somatic reactions of grief that bereaved people do over the loss of a person. These reactions include shock, disbelief, disorientation, immobilization, anger, rage, frustration, guilt, sadness, depression, hurt, numbness, headaches, body-aches, sleep onset/maintenance insomnia, colds, and influenzas.

I recently read Dr. Wallace Sife's updated book, *The Loss of a Pet*. Wallace is a pet loss expert, psychologist and founder of the Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement. Several important points stood out for me — both in a clinical fashion and in a personal way, after having euthanized my 11 and a half year old Flat-Coated retriever Max this past May. These points bear repeating here, given the misplaced and often discounting comments I and my pet loss clients have experienced.

Dr. Sife writes that after the loss of our dog or cat, we – the bereaved survivors – still live “in the echoes of the loving patterns that became our way of life.” Therefore, the grieving process is going to take time and we need to be patient with ourselves as well as with the process of mourning. In other words, we can yell at the blossoming flower of grief to grow and get on with it, but the flower will bloom at its own natural pace. The bond we established with our pets didn't happen over a few minutes or a few weeks. Hence, the healing process of grief that we experience after their death will also take more than minutes or weeks to wind its way through the tributaries of pain, sadness and longing that those of us who are pet owners feel after losing our loving furry companions.

In this process, this concept of “time” can be very deceiving. Dr. Sife notes that time alone does NOT in fact cure anything, but instead, it helps us release enough of our grip without ever fully letting go — or forgetting about our deceased pet. Our disruptive intense emotions subside to a level where we can go on, no longer having to remain in a painful psychic state to honor the memory of our beloved pets. As Sife says, “...time only dulls the sharp edge of new pain, and then gives us a better opportunity to heal ourselves of the worst of it. But some of the ache remains with us, forever...”

Another point stood out for me — both personally and professionally. The act of deciding to euthanize a family pet is a uniquely separate gesture apart from almost any other human endeavor practiced on earth. This is distinctly different from the more frequently discussed political, academic and legalistic challenges of physician-assisted suicide. Our pets cannot tell us what they want, they can't plead with us and they don't have living wills or DNR orders. By default, we are in effect their health proxies and, under extreme emotional distress, we have to wade through moment-by-moment changing veterinary medical information to determine when in fact it is time to make the call and end our beloved pet's suffering by having it euthanized with a fatal dose of anesthetic agent.

I have written extensively on these subjects in my own book, *Dogs on the Couch*, borrowing from medical ethics and animal rights proponents. For instance, I pointed out the “Paternalistic viewpoint of pet euthanasia,” which entails owners placing their own needs and convenience ahead of the pet's actual welfare when pets are reaching the end of their lives. Such people may not euthanize when their pets are suffering - out of not wanting to experience the pain of euthanizing prematurely due to a behavior like housebreaking which can relatively easily be corrected). On the other side, there is the “Preference-Benefits viewpoint of pet euthanasia,” which puts our pet's needs ahead of the our own and recognizes that our pets have preferences in what they need physically and emotionally.

Under the Preference-benefits view, the pet owners recognizes that if pets are in constant or excruciating pain or cannot move, they need to think about euthanizing them. If our dogs or cats cannot eat, drink its water, walk, go to the bathroom or live their lives and fulfill their interests, then out of love and care, we are compelled to relieve our pets' suffering by euthanizing them and giving them some peace.

On May 2, 2006, upon seeing my 11 and a half year old dog Max behaving lethargically, showing signs of anemia, low pulse and fluid collection in his abdominal cavity, I drove him to his veterinarian's office where we X-rayed and did an ultrasound only to learn that a massive cancerous tumor (later determined to be hemangiosarcoma – cancer of red blood cells) had ruptured his spleen and he was bleeding internally. His veterinarian performed an emergency splenectomy to stop the bleeding as well as to remove the ruptured spleen and cancerous mass. Unfortunately, over the next 24 hours, new bleeding began and Max began to show early signs of Disseminated Intravascular Coagulopathy which led to a crash in his blood platelet levels with an accompanying inability to clot his bleeding. He also began showing signs of acute distress and pain. It was at this time, knowing that a transfusion would not stop further bleeding and that the fast growing cancer would kill him in three weeks anyway — with questionable quality of life in the intervening time – that I then made the torturous decision to have him euthanized.

I asked the veterinarian first to give him a little sedative so as to avoid any startle or discomforting reaction on Max's part to the euthanizing injection. I had the veterinarian clip some of his hair for me to keep, and with the two of us sitting cross-legged on the floor with Max laying on a blanket and his head laying in both of my hands, the veterinarian gave him the euthanizing injection in his IV line while I stroked his face and told him how much I loved him. He was gone in under ten seconds. Time: Wednesday, May 3, 2006, 10:30pm, Pacific Time. On the following Monday, May 8, 2006, I buried Max in his doggy coffin with his favorite toys at Seabreeze Pet Cemetery in Huntington Beach, California. I laid him to rest next to my previous dog, Fagan, a 10 year old golden retriever Saluki mix, who we euthanized in October of 1996. On August 5, 2006, I will see his newly installed grave marker and conduct one final memorial service for my sorely missed and dearly departed canine pal.

Psychologist Therese Rando, author of the best-selling book, *How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*, sees grief having three main phases: *Avoidance*, in which there is initial shock, denial and disbelief; followed by *confrontation*, a highly charged emotional state in which one learns over and over that a loved one is dead and in which one's grief is the most intense; and ending with *accommodation*, characterized by a gradual decline of acute grief and the beginning of an emotional and social reentry into the everyday world.

Grief expert Dr. William Worden, in his book *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, outlined "four tasks of mourning." They are: 1. to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life; 2. to accept the reality of the loss; 3. to work through the pain of grief; and 4. to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing. This is the process that I now personally face as I continue with life without Max.

In closing, what I have learned this year with having to say goodbye and euthanizing Max, as well as reading Dr. Sife's updated book on pet loss, can be summed up with a series of recommendations for both the well-wisher and the grieving pet owner. First for the grieving pet owner:

- Feel your feelings and resist any temptations to stifle them with alcohol or drugs.
- Surround yourself with one or more support people who won't make light of your pet's death. Talk about it.
- Ritualize your loss through talking about the good *and* bad times.
- Conduct rite-of-passage rituals such as a graveside memorial service, putting together a remembrance photo album, organizing a family get together, taping a farewell song or preparing a remembrance video.

- Be prepared to experience sounds or sights around your home where you think you hear or see your pet. The first week after Max's death, I was constantly "seeing" a black blur out of the corner of my eye, and found myself thinking I heard Max's collar; or was finding myself engaging in a ten year rehearsed routine getting ready to feed or walk Max. These experiences are normal and will subside over a few days or weeks. Some people experience their deceased pet re-appearing in their dreams. I myself had several dreams where some miraculous cure was found and Max was brought back to life again. Depending on your spiritual or religious beliefs, don't hesitate to acknowledge these experiences along with placing them in the appropriate context of your faith.
- Allow time to heal. Get sufficient rest and nutrition.
- Take off from work whatever time is needed.
- Consider joining a bereavement or pet loss group
- Consult the Internet web site of the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement. This site was created by psychologist Wallace Sife, who became interested in the subject of pet loss and bereavement after his dachshund, Edel Meister, died of congestive heart failure in 1992. Dr. Sife's web site is located at: <http://www.aplb.org>

For the well-wisher:

- Tell the bereaved pet owner that you are sorry to hear about their loss and you give your sincere condolences
- Ask the bereaved pet owner what they need most right now
- Do a mental inventory of your own comfort level and decide what you're able to give and what you're not able to give. Don't promise something you can't deliver
- In following up after the loss, instead of asking "How Are You?," say instead, "I'm calling to check in with you; to see what's going on and if there's anything I can help you with?"
- Sometimes just listening (God gave us two ears and one mouth) and "being there," without trying to "fix it" with reassuring comments or questions about getting a new pet, is the most supportive thing you can do for a bereaved pet owner.
- Within three to six months, most well-wishes get caught up in their day-to-day lives resulting in fewer and fewer supportive visits, phone calls, emails or cards. If you have the stamina and willingness, I recommend you stay in for the long-run and maintain your support as long as the bereaved pet owner wants or needs it.

And finally, with written permission, a poem from a pet-loss client of mine grieving his beloved Great Dane, Thor.

*When I am gone, release me, let me go.  
I have so many things to do.  
You mustn't tie yourself to me with tears.  
Be thankful for our beautiful years.*

*I gave to you my love. You can only guess  
How much you gave to me in happiness.  
I thank you for the love we each have shown,  
But now it's time I traveled on alone...*

*So grieve a while for me, if grieve you must,  
Then let your grief be comforted by trust.  
It's only for a time that we must part.  
So bless the memories within your heart.*

*I won't be far away, for Life goes on.  
So if you need me, call and I will come.  
Though you can't see or touch me, I'll be near...*

*And if you listen with your heart, you'll hear  
All my love around you soft and clear.*

*And then, when you must come this way alone,  
I'll greet you in my usual way,  
And make you feel again, 'Welcome Home.'*

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