

WHEN YOUR PET DIES

A GUIDE TO MOURNING, REMEMBERING, AND HEALING

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.



Companion
PRESS

Fort Collins, Colorado

An imprint of the Center for Loss and Life Transition

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Companion Press is an imprint of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526

Companion Press books may be purchased in bulk for sales promotions, premiums or fundraisers. Please contact the publisher at the above address for more information.

Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04

5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 1-879651-36-X

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INTRODUCTION

In my boyhood I loved a Toy Manchester named Chico. He was an affectionate dog that slept with me every night and had a habit of resting his black and brown head on my leg, ears cocked, letting me know he was ready and waiting to play whenever I was. When I was 12, he darted out our back door and was immediately struck and killed by a car.

I was devastated. I was angry. I was sad. I was bereaved. Chico's death was my first introduction to loss, and what a hard introduction it seemed to me at the time.

In the years since then, I have been the loving owner of a German Shepherd and a succession of Siberian Huskies. At this writing I have three Huskies—Lexi, Dani, and Nikki. All are a part of my heart and my family. I call them "my furriest children."

I grew up to be a grief counselor and educator. It has been a true privilege to “walk with” and learn from thousands of mourners. I have traveled North America extensively, teaching—and being taught—about grief and mourning. I have counseled many mourners at my Center for Loss and Life Transition here in the foothills west of Fort Collins, Colorado.

When Your Pet Dies

Many of these people have shared with me the impact that the death of a pet has had on their lives, indeed, their very beings. You will find a number of these "real life" stories, in the mourner's own words, sprinkled throughout this book. But to truly empathize with these stories, I don't need to call upon all my years of formal education. I only need to open the heart of that 12-year-old boy I was and recall my profound feelings of grief and loss.

This book is for people who grieve after the death of a special pet and who need help mourning, remembering, and healing. Whether you are a dog lover, as I am, or your special pet was a cat, a horse, a bird, a goat, or any other companion animal you loved and cared for, my hope is that this book is a supportive companion to you. After all, what matters is not the kind of animal you love but the love you have for the animal!

This book was written to help you understand why your grief can feel so hurtful and how you can mourn your feelings of grief to help integrate them into your life. It will also give you ideas and a safe place for remembering your pet, so that years from now you will always have a record of your special companion animal. Finally, this book will help you heal, for it is through mourning and remembering that we heal after any death.

I invite you to engage with this book with an open mind and an open heart. Be honest, brave and true—just as your pet was, so you must be now. Let us begin.

PART ONE

MOURNING

Your beloved companion animal has died. I am so very sorry for your loss.

Your grief is a journey that started on the day that your special pet died. Actually, if your pet was sick or in declining health before she died, your grief was set in motion when you first understood that the illness would result in death.

An important distinction to keep in mind as you read this book is the difference between grief and mourning. Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. In other words, grief is the internal meaning given to the experience of loss. Mourning is when you take the grief you have on the inside and express it outside of yourself. Mourning is the outward expression of grief.

In Part One of this book, you will learn not only about common thoughts and feelings of grief after the death of a pet, but ways to mourn those thoughts and feelings, as well. Over time and with the support of others, to mourn is to heal.

The capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn

When a pet dies, you may feel the loss very strongly. You may feel overwhelmed by the depth of your sadness. Others, especially those who have never experienced the joy of giving and receiving love from a pet, may not understand your feelings of loss. They may even imply that you are overreacting.

If you take away only one piece of counsel from this book, let it be this: Your feelings are what they are. The fact that you are having these feelings means you need to have them. Never shame yourself over feelings of love and loss.

The second piece of counsel I hope you take from this book is that you need to express your feelings. The outward expression of grief, or mourning, is how you externalize those thoughts and feelings and ultimately, integrate them into your life.

If your grief feels very painful and debilitating, your brain might be asking your heart why this is so. Following are a few of the main reasons that our beloved companion animals are so important to us.

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The strong bond between people and animals is not a recent phenomenon. Actually, it dates all the way back to ancient times. Archeologists have discovered prehistoric gravesites that prove that people were often buried with their dogs. The early Egyptians thought so much of their cats that when a beloved cat died, the owners shaved off their own eyebrows to acknowledge the loss. This was a way to let others know they were in mourning and needed support. So, as you mourn your pet, remember—people have always loved their pets and mourned their deaths.
