

LIFE AFTER LOSS

by Lee Netzler

Thinking back, it was a good life together. And now, I am at last able to think about it with bitter-sweet memories that are more sweet than not—memories that I enjoy reliving.

It wasn't always that way. I cope very poorly with the loss of a pet companion, but it is often said that when it comes to healing, Time is our best friend. That is a personal truth for me; have no doubt that it will hold true for you, too. When Time has finally traveled with us long enough, our memories are able to produce more pleasure than pain.

Until then, how do we go about coping with the loss of a pet? First of all, we may respond differently. In my case, I am unable to get another dog for months or years—until my grief eases and my state of mind recovers enough to permit it. Others, however, find that the best thing they can do for themselves is to promptly commit to another pet relationship.

Despite these different reactions, there are some things that we all may rely upon. Foremost among these is the support of family and friends. Those who care about you also care about the loss you are suffering. Their conversations and sympathy cards will let you know that you are important to them and that your sadness is shared.

You will also find that your veterinarian and the clinic's staff, the members of dog clubs to which you belong, and even the folks at your local humane society, offer their friendship and assistance to you. Neighbors and co-workers may also recognize your distress. The concern and compassion of others is a major source of strength. Welcome their feelings; take comfort in their support.

As you first try to sort things out, you may need to avoid the everyday reminders of your past relationship. For the time being, collars, leashes, food and water dishes, toys and other personal items may have to be set aside. You may also find that it helps to limit your activities to doing things and going to places where dogs are not likely to be included. But, as time passes, it will become possible to re-establish contacts with the objects and events that you and your pet shared. Handling personal effects, thumbing through photographs, watching family videos, returning to the places and resuming the activities which previously included your dog will eventually turn from bitter to sweet. When you are emotionally able to do so, refresh these connections and make it a point to remember the good times that they represent. These painful reminders will eventually become cherished memories. Dog tags will become keepsakes; documents will become treasured pages of history. Remember: Time is your best friend.

Consider yourself fortunate if you have other pets. They can really help bridge the void of loss. In particular, other dogs seem to sense the stress of the situation and will often offer a closer contact with you. Their companionship, willingness to associate with you through the worst of tears, and their patience in staying with you until life becomes a better place, can be a very big help during your struggle to regain perspective.

On the other hand, people who have NOT had a close pet relationship, may not understand your distress. Be aware of this when they offer well-meaning but inappropriate counsel such as "It was only a dog," or "You can always get another one." Realize that you know the true value of your relationship and the magnitude of your loss. Politely accept their remarks as well-intentioned, but uninformed, and realize that they are not meant to minimize the value of your pet but to offer you their moral support.

Rely on experts to answer your questions and resolve doubts. The library is a place of salvation. Others who have gone through the same experience have labored to make sense of it for those of us who follow. At one point, I doubted that anyone could possibly share my feelings and my pain. It was then I stumbled across the epilogue that Barbara Woodhouse, one of the world's most respected animal trainers and behaviorists, had written in her book No Bad Dogs. She wrote:

"When I lost my favorite Alsatian (German Shepherd), I could not bring myself to own a dog for ten years; he was irreplaceable. Once a dog has entwined himself round your heart he is not only yours for life, but you are his. When he is gone, his place is forever sacred. Other dogs are just as precious, but they all have their allotted spot in your affections kept for them or their memory."

It was a revelation to read that even the renowned animal expert Barbara Woodhouse could not bring herself to form a relationship with another dog for more than ten years after losing her pet companion. Furthermore, she had made a perpetual "sacred place" in her heart and her mind for her friend. Reading about her thoughts and feelings greatly helped me to clarify my own.

Books can help you to understand and manage your feelings about your loss. I will mention two that have been most helpful to me:

When Your Pet Dies, Jamie Quackenbush and Denise Graveline, 1985, Simon and Shuster, Rockefeller Center, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

Pet Loss, A Thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children, Herbert A. Nieberg and Arlene Fischer, 1982, Harper and Row, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

There are several other good books about coping with pet loss and about grief management. Consult your local library and bookstores and take advantage of these resources.

Also check with your veterinarian, because there are many good pamphlets and brochures about coping with pet loss which are available at no cost. Some that deserve mention are produced by the American Animal Hospital Association (which also produces a video), the American Veterinary Medical Association, and the Humane Society. There are a number of others, most of them sponsored by well-known pet food companies. All of these are well-researched, well-presented, informative and supportive.

If you are religiously-oriented, your faith may also provide refuge. Relying on your beliefs, either privately or through public ceremony, may bring you consolation.

Pet loss counseling may be appropriate for you. This service, usually conducted by a qualified professional, is now being recognized as especially beneficial for some grievers, and because of that, it is becoming more available. Counseling is presently being offered through veterinarians, veterinary teaching hospitals, humane society organizations, pet cemeteries and private counselors.

You may also help yourself by helping others. You may be able to offer your support or share your personal experience with someone else—with a hug, a chat, a phone call, a card or a letter. Or, you may be able to contribute your time and energy, or to make financial contributions to programs or organizations which benefit animals. Regardless of the kind of contribution, many who grieve discover that whatever they give to others returns in more than full measure to benefit their own peace of mind.

Make no mistake—some measure of pain will always be with us. But over time, if we are successful at coping with our loss, our feelings about the good times will eventually outweigh that lingering pain.

Finally, I will offer this as my best observation. Beginning the grieving process after a pet is lost is like running the Iditarod and then trying to remember noteworthy features of the race by looking backward from the finish line with a surprised expression on your face. On the other hand, paying attention to the specific details while racing through the course will produce indelible impressions and unforgettable memories that will last far beyond the limits of the event.

Do so with your dog. Consciously prepare for your inevitable finish line. Read the books beforehand and try to ready yourself so that when you are confronted with choices of surgery, euthanasia, burial or cremation, you are not taken by surprise and can manage the necessary transitions. But most of all, make sure that you take the time to create a mental photo album of the good times that you share along the way. Lock in the images of a pleasant walk in the park, of running through the fresh snow, of racing to the water's edge, of playing with a toy, of sharing an ice cream cone, and of all the other many pleasant daily events that you enjoy with your dog. Later, these mental pictures will become the permanent memories of your life together.

Life is temporary. Recognize that there isn't anything much better that could happen to a person in life than sharing company with a good dog. Enjoy the journey. Pay particular attention to making memories along the way, and one day you will be able to smile again and say to yourself, "Thinking back, it was a good life together."