

"I worry when people don't grieve."

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"A Dog's Life"

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Our two year old grand-daughter can be very pushy. Whenever we Facetime on my wife's phone, she demands that we show her close-ups of our Tortoise Shell cat, Nyssa, and our Irish Jack Russell, Bailey, so she can come up to the screen and hug them. Similar to her mother, she has a natural, nearly holy, sensitivity for animals. How do we tell her that her Bailey is no longer with us? Do we say he got a sickness doggies only get and let her response lead the way? Two years old, after all, is two years old. She, similar to our Bailey, cannot comprehend death. In a few years, death might be able to be discussed and described, should she ask. He got old. His heart stopped beating. He doesn't breathe anymore. He can't play and chase the ball.

The death of a pet often is the child's first experience of death. How they learn to handle a pet's death will help them handle grandpa's death. He got old. His heart stopped beating. He doesn't breathe anymore. He can't play and push you on the swing or play tickle over the phone.

With children it is wiser and kinder to avoid assuming they respond the way adults respond. If you tell her that her little doggie is sleeping, will she go easy to her naptime? How long will she wait for doggie to wake up? If you tell her he's with God or angels, will she resent God for not letting her enjoy her doggie? Will she be jealous of and angry at the angels? I would be. Little children have a gift for coming up with their own answers, especially when they are surrounded by loved ones. Important is to let her know that it is alright to be sad. Why? Because we are too. As our son reflected, using a Portuguese word: "saudade," a melancholic sadness. A sweet sadness. I worry when people don't grieve. Tears flowed that late afternoon at the veterinarian's. Something vibrant, loveable is missing in our house. But it was time for us to make this decision. What was the alternative? Him lethargic and sleeping for hours, vomiting white foam, staring blankly, wobbly from the profound weight loss from not eating for a week, recoiling from food. All he wanted was to rest against his best beloved.

What is the difference between the canine mammal and the human mammal? We have similar organs. We have similar bodily functions: We breathe, we eat, we procreate, we poop. The difference is that humans are consciously aware of these functions, of ourselves, of time, of death. A linguist taught how only humans can talk about talk. A dog doesn't even know it is a dog. Dogs and cats live in the here and now. Cats and dogs deserve the respect of being treated like dogs and cats, rather than as furry, four-legged humans. One of our cats, Nyssa's brother Adric, suffered a stroke. He recovered somewhat. One day he disappeared. He went off, we believe, to die on his cat terms.

In a Fresh Air interview by Terry Gross, anthrozoologist John Bradshaw, author of the books "Cat Sense," and "Dog Sense," explained how cats and dogs lack a concept of quantity of life, important to humans (and a blessed curse to us humans). Pets only experience quality of life. He added how his only regrets with regard to euthanizing his animals have been when he let the lack of quality of life for his pets continue too long, for his sake.

My antennae sense Bailey was acting by instinct by not eating. He was telling us he was ready, even if he didn't comprehend his decline cognitively. What was the alternative? Do we impose strange,

distressing measures and intrusive procedures, producing in him more anxiety, just to soothe ourselves? No, because we love them, we shouldn't be so selfish. No, he was our responsibility. Yes, we get the best medical advice about where the hope lies. Yes, our pets wouldn't understand that they are receiving chemotherapy or surgery to preserve their lives. Toward what end? That is the key question we humans need to ask on behalf of our pets. Insert catheter for sedation. Inject the sedative while cradled by his best friend. Place him on the blanket on the examining table and complete the kindness. Wrap him up. When the veterinarian carried him out, I told her it reminded me of her carrying a baby.