



Hospice Yukon

## Pet Loss

### Pet Loss - a Hidden Sorrow

By Deb Higgins



Animals hold a special place in our lives and our hearts. Caring for and seeking companionship from animals is part of what defines our humanity, and can be traced back to the very origin of our species. Throughout history and in modern day, across all cultures and around the world, humans can be found living with pets.

Animals enrich our lives in so many ways. Whether big or small, furry, feathered or scaly, they are constant companions who delight in our company and offer us unconditional love and affection. Pets reduce loneliness and decrease stress; they make us laugh and nuzzle away our tears. They are treasured members of the family who motivate us to stay active, and their caretaking provides a rhythm to our day.

Understandably, losing a loyal friend like this can be devastating. Yet the intensity of the grief often takes us by surprise. Often adding to the pain of this experience is having to make difficult decisions around euthanization, and choices about the pet's care based on our financial resources.

For many people their relationship with their pet is one of the

most important in their life.

But society hasn't traditionally valued animal relationships in the same way we value humans. Because of this, it is common for people to feel unsure or embarrassed about publicly expressing the grief they feel over the death of their pet for fear that it may not be recognized or understood. The term for this is *disenfranchised grief*.

Disenfranchised grief - when a person's loss is not validated by society or those closest to them - makes a loss even more difficult than it needs to be. It isolates a person at a time when they are most in need of connection and support. Isolation amplifies the experience of grief; support and community soothes it.

We can best support someone after the death of their pet by:

- Validating their loss
- Asking how they are feeling
- Listening without judgment
- Sharing memories of the pet
- Sending a card or flowers
- Inviting them for a walk
- Sharing ideas of rituals and ways to honour the pet
- Encouraging self care

If you are grieving the loss of your companion these things can help you in your grief:

- Create your own unique rituals to honour your pet
- Find ways to express your emotions - this is how we heal
- Reach out for support
- Know that you're not alone

Henry Wordsworth Longfellow said "*There is no grief like the grief that does not speak*". By speaking of pet loss, we can all help ease the pain of this grief.

We are grateful to the Yukoners who, in these pages, have bravely told their stories of losing their beloved pets, and the poignant and creative things they have done to honour their memory and soothe their grief.

For some, losing a pet will be one of the greatest sorrows of their life. Our hope is for those who experience this loss to find comfort - both in the ways they remember their pet, and from our community as whole.



*"What we have once enjoyed we can never lose;*

*All that we love deeply becomes a part of us."*

Helen Keller

## Is it time to say goodbye?

By Kristenn Magnusson BSc DVM



Dr. Kristenn Magnusson with her dog Stella

Deciding if it is time to say goodbye to a pet is never an easy decision, nor should it be. Numerous factors make the decision difficult, and the sheer responsibility of it lies heavy on many pet owners shoulders. Is it time to say goodbye? How will you know?

The first difficult fact to accept is that unfortunately pets live much shorter lives than we do. And by nature they tend to hide their ailments as long as they possibly can. By the time a pet is showing you that they are ill, in pain, tired, or nauseous, they have probably been enduring it for a while. So, when they do show symptoms such as these we need to take them seriously.

We often expect our pets to deteriorate gradually as they age, but it is important to remember that age is not the disease. When changes in behaviour or wellness are seen, try not to assume the changes are due to old age. Consult a veterinarian to examine your pet; the knowledge you gain can give you insight about your pet's health that can empower confident decision-making.

The next thing to accept is that with an ageing pet, we need to focus on the quality, not the quantity, of life. Their quality of life is defined by overall physical and mental well-being, not just a single aspect of their lives. If you are unsure how to

judge this, there are questionnaires available online that can walk you through a quality of life assessment for your pet.

With quality of life in mind, the question "is it time to say goodbye?" can be rephrased as "what degree of quality of life is adequate to carry on?" or "how far is okay to let the quality of life deteriorate?" If your pet's current quality of life is as good as it is expected to get, is it good enough?

Animal welfare groups across the world refer to a list called The Five Freedoms, and require that animals are free from these when under human care:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst;
- Freedom from pain, injury and disease;
- Freedom from distress;
- Freedom from discomfort;
- Freedom to express behaviours that promote well-being.

If a pet cannot be managed such that they are experiencing these criteria, it is concluded that their quality of life has deteriorated too far.

However, a pet's quality of life does not depend only on these five freedoms. As your pet ages, I recommend discussing or writing down what the pets 'best days' include. Then look at how many of those experiences the pet is currently having. Repeat the exercise looking at the 'bad days'. There is no perfect formula, but the exercise may help

to expose the current realities of the pet's quality of life.

If family or friends are having a difficult time agreeing on how the pet is doing, it can help to look through photos from the pet's life, starting with the early years and working towards the present. For some, the visual of how the pet has aged can provide a meaningful realization.

I have seen pet owners who know that the end is near, but feel uncomfortable with the thought of making an end-of-life decision. Some have shared that they "just want him/her to die naturally". However, too often natural death involves a crisis for the pet, and perhaps a crisis for the owner(s) and whoever else is present during the death. With euthanasia, we have the ability to avoid a crisis for everyone, especially the pet. We can give everyone a chance to say goodbye, and take time to cherish the pet while they are still with us. A peaceful and comfortable passing is what we wish for our pet, and with humane euthanasia we can ensure it. Sometimes the bravest, kindest and most selfless decision we can make is to say goodbye.

Euthanasia is a difficult topic for pet-owners. If you find yourself considering that it might be time, trust yourself. Seek an expert opinion on your pet's wellness and take a genuine look at the quality of life your pet is experiencing day to day.

*"It is ironic that the hardest decision a pet owner must make is the one that is the most caring and kind."*

Dr. Andy Mathis



## Remembering Peppie

by Joanna Cole

Peppie was my best friend for 18 years. I got him as a kitten when I was 12. He travelled with me from the East coast through BC and finally we settled in the Yukon. Peppie saw me through the trials of adolescence, the breakups and bad decisions of early adulthood, getting married and starting my thirties, through loss and pregnancy, right up until a month before my first child was born.

Peppie's death was peaceful and the timing really couldn't have been better. His health had been declining for a couple of years, his kidneys were slowly failing. Around New Years, he seemed to be in pain; he wasn't moving or eating or drinking very much. We made the decision to have him euthanized, which was sad, but the vet agreed it was the best thing for him. I was glad that Peppie didn't suffer too much.

I didn't know what to do with his body when we took it

home. It was January, so burial was not an option. That first night, we laid his body out in the living room on his favorite blanket. He looked peaceful, and it felt good to have him with us a bit longer.

A parcel from my mom had arrived on the day of Peppie's death. It included a painting I made of him when I was 12. It was a strange coincidence because my mom had sent the parcel weeks earlier, not knowing that Peppie would soon be leaving us. We propped the cheerful painting up beside Peppie's body as he rested in the living room that night.

The next day, we prepared a funeral pyre in our backyard. I wrapped Peppie up with a few of his favorite things, and placed him on the pyre, which we burned and tended to for a couple of days. It was powerful to play a direct role in his cremation. We were also cleaning out our woodstove at the time, so we re-lit it with

coals from Peppie's fire. Our house was warmed by that fire for the rest of the winter. It felt like a fitting tribute after Peppie had spent so many hours curled up by that woodstove.

When the ashes had cooled, I collected the bones and kept them in a little jar. I had been inspired by traditional Japanese bone-picking rituals. Going through the ashes by hand, it felt very sad and final to have my best friend reduced to just a few little bone shards.

I sent some of Peppie's ashes to a glass artist friend. She swirled the ashes into beautiful marble which I keep near a photo of Peppie, along with his bones. She also crafted a heart-shaped necklace so I could wear a little piece of Peppie beside my heart.

I was very, very sad about losing Peppie, but I was strengthened by the rituals I created to honour his passing, and thank him for his companionship.



## Rituals and ways to honour a pet

Hold a memorial service in their memory.

Have an artist draw or paint their portrait.

Display a framed photo of them in your home.

Create a photo album of their life.

Take a paw print before or after their death.

Keep some of their fur as a keepsake.

Write down favourite stories about your pet.

Share memories with friends and family.

Mark their burial spot with a headstone or special stone. Plant flowers to make a garden.

After cremation, place their ashes in a special bag or urn, or created into art (glass, etc.).

Scatter ashes in a place that was special to you and your pet, or plant a tree or flower on them.

Honour their life in creative or unique ways...



## A Funeral Service for a Dog

By Katharine Sandiford



Wilbur was more than a pet. More than a best friend. More than just a handsome, athletic, intelligent, affectionate husky mutt. He was a part of me. I had spent nearly every moment with him in the ten years leading up to his tragic death. He was a canine extension of my human self, as I imagine I was the human extension to his canine self. Yes, we were that close.

Four years ago he was killed by wolves on the shores of Marsh Lake just within sight of our home. It was a February evening, the sun had set but there was still a dusky light reflecting off the snow. I let him outside just after dinner, and I remember seeing him curled up in the chair on the deck overlooking the lake. Suddenly, he burst into an explosion of barks and took off down the hill toward the frozen shore. I was thinking it was not that unusual, he probably sighted a neighbour's dog or wayward fox. After we put the kids to bed, my partner went out to look. He came back a few moments later pale-faced and holding a tail. He said that the rest of Wilbur - a few legs, a spine - was now in a plastic bag in the shed. The wolves had made quick work of their dinner. I curled up on the dog mat with the tail, this incredibly long, soft, white-tipped tail and felt my insides tumble downward.

I've lost beloved humans before; I am no stranger to grief.

But this loss is in its own category. Granted, I am that crazy dog lady who elevated her furry pet to a superior position in the household — and in her heart.

He was my faithful, adoring companion, accompanying me to work, social gatherings, on vacations, or on my daily trail outings. So when he vanished so suddenly, it was like a plug was pulled and a kind of life force was drained from my being. The world, through my eyes, was literally a dimmer place. My daily routines ground to a halt. The dog bed became a regular place for me to curl up and weep.

In an attempt to cope with this loss, I decided to hold a funeral service for Wilbur. We lit a 2-day fire, not just as a ceremonial gesture, but to thaw the frozen ground where we were to dig his grave. I broadcast an invitation to anyone who ever cared for Wilbur, including family, friends, and acquaintances. It was incredible how many neighbours showed up who had independently befriended him. I put together a slide show, a little speech. Over 20 people showed up. They signed his guestbook, they cried with me around the grave as we lowered his remains and covered him with dried fireweed flowers before sealing him up with dirt. They shared whiskey with me and howled around the bonfire. Without a stitch of embarrassment or self-consciousness, I was the crazy, bereaved dog lady.

I knew what I was doing was unconventional. A funeral for a pet? I'm sure some people might scoff at the concept. But outside of the handful of people who showed up expressly to support me, and not necessarily because they cared for my dog, there were a good dozen or more who, to my surprise, attended the service to honour their own relationship with Wilbur.

A pet funeral may not be for everyone, nor for every pet. Wilbur was something of a phenomenon and his charms were appreciated widely. More importantly, my grief was intense and the gathering and ceremony really helped me to put some order back in my life. To feel supported by friends, to publicly grieve and share the loss with others was an important thing for me to do.

I have two new dogs now. They are also incredible beings but aren't quite occupying the same space in my heart that Wilbur did. Maybe this is because I have two kids and a spouse now, whereas Wilbur was my free-wheeling companion. Or like losing a soul mate, sometimes you just don't ever 'get over' the loss of a love. Knowing that I will probably live the rest of my life missing Wilbur is okay with me now. Falling back on the memory of his funeral will forever serve me with strength - to feel that life net of friends surround me and carry out the rites that help give meaning to this kind of tragedy.

*"Because of the dog's joyfulness, our own is increased. It is no small gift."*  
Mary Oliver



## Remembering Sage

By Theo Forwell

Who said a dog is man's best friend? I would have to disagree. I had a cat named Sage. He was born in a barn in Kamloops and he was my best friend for 13 years. Sage was unique. His personality was like a dog: I'd call him and he would come, he liked to go for walks, he liked having his hair done, yet he was a cat. In 13 years he moved with me 13 times and he was fine with that as long as we were together. He adapted extremely well with changes in homes, climates, roommates and other animals. He was a bit of a chick magnet. Sage was just a cool cat.

We all know that living rural residential can be a risk when having small dogs and cats. Sage was always an outdoor cat and was streetwise and bush wise from all the places

he lived. When my wife and I bought a house in the country, we knew there were a lot of fox and coyote in the area. I also knew it would be impossible to keep Sage indoors.

One morning Sage did not come home after his night prowling. I hoped and prayed all day that he would show up but I knew deep in my heart that he was taken by a wild thing. I was completely devastated. Hurt, grief, sadness, frustration, anger, guilt, I felt all of these things for a long time. I knew I had to feel these things. The hardest part is that I never saw his body, and could not see him again. A part of me still hoped he would suddenly show up again, 'the cat came back', but I knew he was truly gone.

It took me a long time to heal. My wife and I had a funeral for Sage with a bonfire, prayers,

poems, photos, stories and his toys. We cried a lot. I spent a lot of time by myself. I also made a journal, and I am not a journaling person. I wrote of memories, included photos, some of his fur. I was surprised how much the journal helped me. It was a real freedom to express my feelings without any judgment or worrying what others would think.

I talked to people. Some were supportive and others did not understand. I felt guilty for a while wondering if I could have kept him safer.

I did heal in time, but I know I will never have another cat like Sage. I loved and cherished him, and took good care of him, and he of me. I still feel a deep love and connection to him and believe I always will.



Theo's beloved Sage

## Pets grieve too...

Grief at losing a companion is not exclusively a human experience. Animal's grief has been well-documented in elephants, primates, wolves, otters, whales, dolphins, as well as in domestic animals like cats, dogs, horses, and parrots.

The most obvious signs of grief in our surviving pets are behavioural changes. A grieving pet may have less appetite for food and treats, they may check or spend time in their companion's favourite places, they may seek more (or less) attention, sleep

more or seem less energetic than what is usual for them.

We can help our pets through this difficult time by spending time with them and engaging in activities they enjoy, like walking or playing. We can also help them by keeping their daily routine as consistent as possible.

Some feel it can help to have the surviving pet present during euthanasia, or allow them to see and smell their friend's body. They might not show an obvious reaction, but it may help them

understand there is no need to look for their companion.

We want to comfort our pets, but it helps to be mindful of when we offer attention. Especially with dogs, giving them attention when they are showing anxiety or stress can inadvertently reward and reinforce these behaviors.

Animals are resilient by nature. The passage of time will help to ease their grief, and you and your surviving pet(s) may find comfort in one another.



## Supporting a Child after a Pet Dies By Deb Higgins



Animals are very important members in any household. For children, pets can be a source of unconditional love and comfort, a playmate, as well as giving them a sense of responsibility in the caretaking of their pet. While the death of a pet is heartbreaking for everyone in the family, the loss is often felt most intensely by the children. In many cases the loss of a pet is a child's first experience with death.

Our natural instinct as parents and caregivers is to protect the children we care for. But in the case of grief, it can be helpful to remind ourselves that loss is an inevitable part of life, and grief is a natural response to loss. There is no need (and no way) to 'fix' it, so the best response is to prepare - rather than protect - our children to cope with loss. We can support healthy emotional development by talking about death, answering children's questions, and supporting the expression of their grief.

Children are very curious and may ask all kinds of questions about death and dying, both in general and about the pet's specific situation. It is best to answer questions honestly, offering an age-appropriate amount of information. If you don't know the answer to one of their questions it's ok to 'wonder together'. Creating an atmosphere of openness around all aspects of the pet's death will benefit everyone.

Children tend to grieve for a shorter period of time than adults, however their grief is no

less intense. A child's style of grieving has been described as 'puddle-jumping' where they dip in and out of their grief. They may cry and feel intensely sad one minute, then be happily playing with friends the next. This serves to protect them from the intensity of their grief.

Young children absorb the reality and impact of a loss through repetition and story telling. Be willing to listen to them and respond to their requests to repeatedly tell the story or recount details of the pet's decline or death through words or play. Patience is an important part of supporting a child's grieving process.

Grief can include a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, fear, and guilt. We can best support children by acknowledging these emotions, and helping them find ways to express them. Recounting memories of the pet and doing tangible things like drawing, making a scrapbook, looking at pictures, or creating a memory box can help a child express how they are feeling. It can be a special time of being together as a family and celebrating the life of the pet.

Children's grief can manifest in different behaviours such as irritability, hyperactivity, sleep disturbances, and behavioural regression like a return to bed-wetting or tantrums. Physical symptoms of grief can include tummy aches, headaches, and fatigue.

Use simple, direct language in talking about the death with children. Avoid euphemisms like 'the vet put Buster to sleep', or 'God took Buster' as these can cause the child to become fearful of going to sleep, or worry that God will take them or their loved ones. Children may also worry that they somehow caused the death of the pet, or that they or their loved ones will also die. Offer hugs and reassurance to soothe these concerns.

Include the child in everything that they would like to be involved in surrounding the death of the pet. This could include caring for the pet in its final days, visits to the vet, being present for the euthanasia, deciding what to do with the body, and organizing some sort of memorial. Follow the interest and comfort level of the child, and encourage them to take an active role in the process. This can be an important part of healing.

Let the child's teacher know about the death of the pet so that they are aware and can support the child the way they want to be supported. Some may want to show pictures of their pet to the class, or need time to themselves.

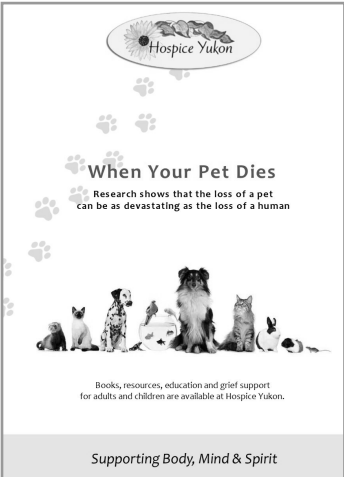
The death of a beloved pet can be a profound experience for a child. As they grow older they may revisit the loss, reflecting and integrating the experience in new ways as they become more mature.

*"For adults, grief is like wading through an enormous river, whereas for children it's puddle jumping. But when they're in that puddle it's no different than the river."*

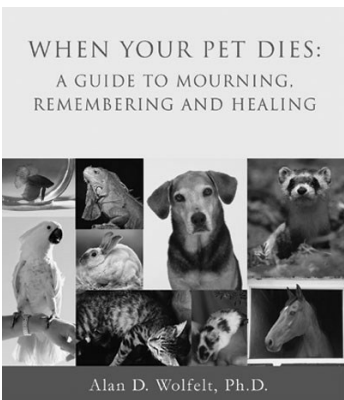
*Julie Stokes*



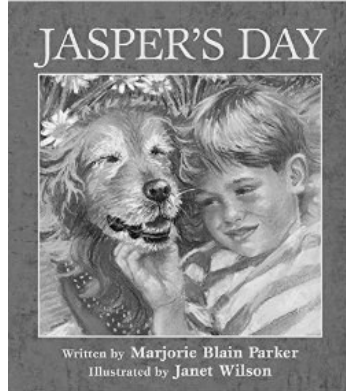
# Pet loss resources at Hospice Yukon...



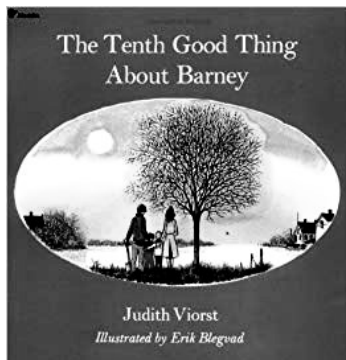
This is a pamphlet to support owners through the loss of their pet. It contains helpful information about the grief journey, supporting children and surviving pets, and ideas of how to mourn the loss of your pet. It is available at Hospice Yukon and some local vet clinics.



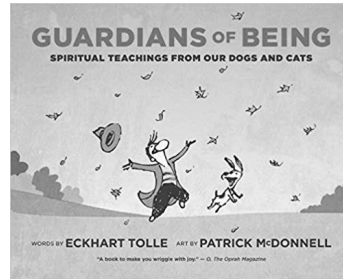
This is grief expert Alan Wolfelt's book on pet loss, from a series of books on different types of loss. It is easy to read and filled with helpful information about grief, practical ideas of how to mourn a loss and find healing, and stories of pet loss written by owners.



This picture books offers a gentle starting point to talk about euthanizing a family pet with a child. Jasper's Day is the story of how a young boy creates a special last day for his old dog before he is euthanized. It's a tender story, beautifully told and suitable for kids aged 5 and up. Adults will enjoy it too. (Keep the tissues handy!)



This is a beautiful storybook for children and families. *"My cat Barney died this Friday. I was very sad. My mother said we could have a funeral for him, and I should think of ten good things about Barney so I could tell them..."* But the boy could only think of nine. Later, while talking with his father, he discovers the tenth -- and begins to understand.



Guardians of Being is an insightful comic-style book written by spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle and beautifully illustrated by the creator of Mutts, Patrick McDonnell. Hospice staff Jennifer Groot described it as "easy to read, delightful, and profound." Many pet owners lovers will resonate with the message that our animal companions have much to teach us about being fully present, if we are only ready to listen.



*"I have lived with several Zen masters — all of them cats."*  
Eckhart Tolle



Feelie hearts are small, hand-sewn plush hearts that remind us to hold our hearts tenderly. There are plain feelie hearts as well as ones with animal prints for people who have loved and lost a pet. Some are open on one side and can be stuffed with the pet's fur as a keepsake. Feelie hearts as well as kits to sew your own are available at Hospice Yukon.





## How can we support you?



### **Living with Loss**

A free, 2-hr education session to help you better understand the grieving experience. Offered four times per year.

### **Counselling**

One on one support for those who are dying or grieving and their loved ones.

### **Healing Touch**

Relaxing energy therapy that can offer relief from the pain of grief. Clients lie fully clothed on a massage table and receive gentle, soothing touch.

### **Grief Support Groups**

Various groups (walking, creative, discussion) that help grieving people find support and connection with others. See our website for upcoming offerings.

### **Lending Library**

Come in to browse and borrow from our range of books and other resources.

### **Vigil Support**

Bedside support in the final week to days of life.

### **Professional Support**

Support and resources for workplaces facing loss and those in the caring professions.

*All of these programs are offered free of charge.*

*Please call 867 667 7429 or email [info@hospiceyukon.net](mailto:info@hospiceyukon.net) for more info.*

[www.hospiceyukon.net](http://www.hospiceyukon.net)

*Please visit us online at [www.hospiceyukon.net](http://www.hospiceyukon.net)*

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