

For Cooper

There's something so painful in the space that exists between knowing that there will be a loss and the actual event. It's an anticipatory grief that can overwhelm us. The idea of that precious one who will no longer exist in the rooms he or she once occupied. The eyes will no longer fill with their presence. The thought of going on when they are no longer there feels almost unbearable. We've all been through it in some form or other and will be again. Some believe that the antidote is to never get close - then the heart will not be broken. But is that any way to live?

Soon I have to make a decision. I have to determine when pain exceeds quality of life. I have to end a life that made living on this planet so much easier for me. I have to say "enough" to the suffering. I have to be strong and capable in order to do this thing. I hope that, when the time comes, I will be ready . . .

Cooper came into our family's life so smoothly that nothing was disrupted. He blended right in. He adjusted to the household routine as if he had lived there all his life; in fact, he had spent the last six months living with a homeless alcoholic and sleeping under cars. He was about a year old, a lab mix, with soulful eyes and a blonde coat that looked dingy and dull. He had more growing to do and once he got a steady diet, he gained about 20 lbs. He was raw muscle and high energy, racing around the house and always ready for a long hike up and down hills and over the local trails. He would greet each member of the household as if it had been an extended absence, toy at the ready dangling from his mouth. He "talked" incessantly in a whine. He wasn't complaining- he just wanted to include you in his excitement, over dinner, a walk, a rabbit.

Sometimes he would come home from a four mile hike only to run again around the yard. He would race from room to room and, for reasons known only to himself, wind up on his back with all four paws up in the air. He greeted each day with enthusiasm and when told, "I'll be back", would immediately slink under the bed in disappointment. It seemed as if he had learned our language. He did such a good job of communicating that we soon came to know his. That's why, when he was diagnosed with bone cancer some weeks ago, we figured he would let us know when he couldn't take the pain anymore.

I have a client who also is attached to her dog. She had a dream about him when he was sick and she was trying to decide whether to take him home and try to nurse him back to health. The dream was a vision of what was to be, a glimpse into the future of what is now a happy, healthy dog. This dog is her travelling companion and ambassador to the world. He makes friends wherever he goes and takes her with him. Her boys are grown and live far away. Without him, she might feel lonely. Without him, she would have no one to take care of but herself. Another client has her cats. When she lost her husband, they filled the void. They performed on counters and in the trees until she felt like living again. They keep her laughing and she takes their stories to others who need to hear it.

We need our pets. Research has strongly supported a wide range of emotional and physical benefits that come from owning a pet. They help us to get exercise, calm and soothe stress, and serve to reduce loneliness. They are especially helpful in a hospital setting where animal-assisted therapy is being used more and more. Many colleges have programs where animals are brought in during midterms and finals to reduce stress in their student population. Just petting a dog or cat can raise levels of serotonin and dopamine in the brain, our “feel good” chemicals. Studies have shown that Alzheimer’s patients have reduced anxious outbursts where there is a pet in the home. One Ohio insurance company asks clients if they have a pet as part of their medical screening; this is scored as favorable on their application.

I often hear couples who contemplate having a child speaking about their first pet together as a “trial run”. If that pet survives and even thrives, they feel pretty confident that they can transfer their caregiving to humans. Many an animal has paved the way to better parenting skills. And maybe it is true after all, that we eventually look like our pets. They certainly bring out the best in us. So I guess I wouldn’t mind if I’ve taken on some of my dog’s features – he has beautiful golden eyes ringed with black. Thanks, Cooper, for a lifetime of love. And thanks to all your brothers and sisters out there who are doing such good work in the areas of emotional and physical caregiving – all without degrees.

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