POINT OF INFORMATION

Saying "Goodbye"

Coping with companion animal loss

BY LAURA WILENSKY

PHOTO: MARIN HUMANE SOCIETY

COMPANION ANIMALS ADD SO MUCH TO OUR LIVES. But unfortunately they have a shorter lifespan, and their loss can cause intense and profound grief.

I remember all too vividly when I had to say farewell to my Siamese cat, Honeydew, who shared my life for 8-1/2 years. She was there with me through thick and thin, joy and sorrow. But tragedy struck when she was diagnosed with feline leukemia. I tried everything to cure her, even cat acupuncture. When there was nothing else to do, I decided to let her go in her own natural way. I believe it is up to each of us to decide on the issue of euthanasia. I was grateful Honeydew and I could be together during her last days, because they were some of our most precious; her quiet dignity a great teacher. When she died, I performed a ritual in her honor, and then buried her in my backyard. Through that process, I felt at peace with her passing and my own grief. To this day, I carry her memory in my heart.

For some of us, the loss of a companion animal is much like the death of a close human tie. However, while there are numerous support groups and organizations to help a person deal with the loss of a human friend or family member, similar support networks are not readily available for the loss of a companion animal. A grieving owner may feel embarrassed when a friend responds, "it was just a pet—you can get another."

Understanding the Stages of Grief

There are four stages that accompany the death of a loved one. While not everyone experiences these feelings in this order, a fairly typical pattern begins with denial, perhaps in the form of hope for a cure. The second response may be anger at yourself for not having done something differently. Or, the anger may be directed outward, at the veterinarian for being unable to save or cure your companion. The third stage is bereavement. This is often characterized by depression and indulging in painful memories. The final stage is acceptance and resolution. In time, hopefully, a healing will occur.

Finding Support

It is important during this time to express your feelings. If you suppress the pain now, it may simply resurface years later. Ask your friends to hear you out; after all, you are expressing your feelings and they should be considerate of your pain. Contact your local humane society to determine if they offer grief counseling or can refer you to someone in your area who does. Another option is to write about how you feel. Some people send out simple notices with inscriptions or poems, to those who knew their companion animals and would wish to be advised of their passing. Greeting card companies even have a small line of sympathy cards for the loss of an animal. Whether or not you decide to adopt another companion animal is an individual choice. Many people wait to allow a time of mourning. For others, a new animal eases the pain of the one who is gone.

While losing a companion animal is one of life's great sorrows, never having one at all is to miss out on years of loving companionship. The memory of that experience can be transformed into loving once again.

FURTHER READING

You can obtain the following books and pamphlets:

Pet Loss and Human Bereavement, W. J. Kay et. al., (eds). The Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa, 1984.

When Your Pet Dies: How to Cope with Your Feelings, J.E. Quackenbush, D. Graveline. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1985.

Pet Loss, a Thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children, H.A. Nieburg and A. Fischer. Harper and Row, New York, 1982.

Coping with the Loss of a Pet: A Gentle Guide for All Who Love A Pet, Christina M. Lemieux, Wallace R. Clark, Reading, PA, 1988/1992.

"Losing a Best Friend" A collection of articles compiled by The San Francisco SPCA, 2500 Sixteenth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 (415) 554-3000.

"Pet Loss & Bereavement" A packet published by the Delta Society ($16.00 plus $5.00 postage), as well as two supplements for veterinary and mental health professionals ($3.00 each) (206) 226-7357.

Laura Wilensky is ALDF's resident journalist and Editor of the Animals' Advocate.

PROFILE: VALERIE STANLEY

Introducing ALDF's new litigator

THE ANIMALS' ADVOCATE is happy to welcome Valerie Stanley as ALDF's full time staff attorney. Valerie is well known to ALDF members; as a partner in the firm of Galvin & Stanley she led ALDF's five-year legal battle to extend greater protections to animals used in research laboratories. Her tenacious and thorough litigation style won the precedent-setting victory on behalf of birds, rats and mice used in research. We are very pleased to have this deeply committed individual working with us.

PHOTO: DARROW MONTGOMERY

Valerie Stanley with Lady and Clipper.

ALDF: Can you tell us a little about your background?

Stanley: I graduated from Catholic University Law School, and I am married with two wonderful children, a son, 3, and a daughter, 5 months. We share our lives with one horse, one pony (who I've had for 25 years), four cats and two dogs.

What led you into the field of animal rights and animal rights law?

I have felt a particular empathy with animals all my life. I volunteered at the Washington Humane Society in 1972, and again one night per week from 1976 until I started law school in 1979. I did everything there: cleaned cages, picked up abused and unwanted animals, sheltered animals at my home and did house checks for adoptions.

First hand, I viewed the suffering of animals from neglect and abuse. I expanded my awareness of how society treats all animals and became a vegetarian in 1979. I decided to go to law school to help end animal suffering through law.

Could you tell us a little about the history of Galvin & Stanley and how you first came in contact with ALDF?

I met Roger Galvin and Holly Hazard through a local chapter of the Animal Legal Defense Fund in 1986 when we worked on the USDA face branding case.

As part of the Dairy Termination Program, USDA required farmers who sold their dairy cows for slaughter to identify them by face-branding them with a hot iron. I remember talking to other attorneys who had far more experience in administrative law than I did. They all told me that no judge was going to interfere with USDA's discretion by declaring this method of branding cruel.

I went home very discouraged and upset. The next morning I ignored these attorneys' advice and vowed to throw myself into doing everything I could to stop the practice. Every night for three weeks, Roger, Holly and I met after our regular jobs to do legal research and draft a lawsuit against USDA. We began to realize that we could work together and that we were not tired despite all the hours we worked because we believed in what we were doing.

As it turned out, the practice was ruled inhumane in a companion lawsuit. At that time, Roger, Holly and I began to talk about establishing a partnership, which we did in July of 1986.

How do you define animal rights?

An animal's rights are quite basic, I believe. One might as well call an animal's needs equivalent to the animal's rights. An animal's needs are just as important to the animal as our needs are to us. When one considers how animal rights can affect human rights, the need for some balancing arises. Animals may not always win the balance, just as humans may not always win, but at least in this frame-

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