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After All, He was Only a Pet... When Being Strong Hurts More Than Grieving Can

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The death of a pet is never an easy time. Whether it is an older animal, who may have been a part of the family longer than most of the furniture and some of the children, or a pet who has been with you for only a few years, the loss can be truly traumatic. And if the end comes through a conscious decision for euthanasia, other emotions become entangled with the basic sense of loss. Once it's over, you may prefer to think that the experience is behind you. Unfortunately, it is not.

There will be a hole in your household and in your life for a while, and for the first part of that "while" the hole may seem huge. There ARE ways to fill the gap. However, the loss itself is not something you can simply ignore, assuming that your world will adjust itself. Instead, you must deal with that something, just as you would deal with the loss of any other good friend. Yes, it is a different kind of relationship, but to behave otherwise is to try and change your attitude in mid-stride. You cannot expect yourself to think of your pet as a friend and then to dismiss those feelings as disposable because THIS friend happened to be an animal. It is NOT silly to miss your pet, and it is NOT overly sentimental to grieve.

Another difference lies in the always complicated idea of "what happens next". Many people, especially older folks, express a very real concern that they won't see their animals in the next life (whatever that may be) because they have been told that animals have no souls. Maybe you, like me, are a little unsure about what exactly "the next life" holds for any of us. However, if having a soul means being able to feel love and trust and gratitude, then aren't some animals better equipped than a lot of humans?

But still, he was pet and not a person, and that makes it more complicated to sort out exactly what you are supposed to do and feel. Although we recognize the individual personalities in pets, that doesn't mean that they are just little people. The relationship you have with your pet is different from any human relationship you may have. We have the responsibility to care for animals and to learn from them. As we domesticated pets, they became dependent upon us for their needs. Part of caring for them, especially in a technologically advanced society, often means deciding when an animal can no longer live a happy life or even a content one.

When an animal is made a pet by a responsible, caring person, he is being given exactly what he needs and wants: his "creature comforts", companionship, and the opportunity to return the favor through loyalty and affection. Dogs, especially, are naturally eager to please the "leader of the pack", and the owner takes on that role. So the dog is never happier than when he knows that he is pleasing that person. When he is too old or too sick to respond in the way HE thinks he should, he can't understand why and feels the anxiety of failure.

Because their natural life-spans are shorter than ours, we usually outlive our pets. However, the life you shared cannot simply be abandoned. Don't deny yourself the thoughts, memories, and feelings that your pet's life deserves. You may decide to fill the hole with another pet. However, you can never replace the special bond you held with the one who is gone.