

# Everlasting Bond

by Lyn T. Garson, CVT

## Grieving a Pet's Loss Illustrates Strength of the Human-Animal Bond

Peg Daigle vividly remembers the day her husband, Jim, proudly presented her with a Weber grill box for their anniversary. The cardboard box was cut out in the front and filled with toy stuffed animals. Sleeping among them was a seven-week-old golden retriever puppy they named Lucas.

For nine years, Peg awoke every morning to the warmth of Lucas. As she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, the bottom of her feet brushed the fur across Lucas' body while he lay in his favorite place on the floor at her bedside. After Lucas succumbed to cancer, the loss of this daily ritual was just one of many painful adjustments for Peg, "The floor was just so cold and empty without him," she recalls.

In her experience assisting individuals with pet loss and grief, Joanne Wholey, a Licensed Professional Counselor and founder of The Pet Loss Support Group in Bloomfield, Connecticut, has found that, "People initially speak most about their difficulty with the drastic change in routines." A feeling of emptiness is left when the responsibilities of daily caring, feeding and grooming and the enjoyment of interacting with our pets is suddenly gone. As one who has grieved the death of five companion animals, Wholey shares her own experience of personal loss. "The hardest part for me has been looking forward to the exuberant greeting and then being jolted by the reality of the deafening quiet."



Losing a forever friend, no matter what the species, is never easy. The loss can be even more profound when those around us seem to not understand the impact, or worse, dismiss our emotions. But American society has slowly become more accepting of the effect the death of a pet has on our lives. Wholey believes this is due to a change from the value society previously placed on animals as hunters, protectors, and workers. "Once we began to experience their companionship, and feelings of well-being just by watching them play, or sitting quietly with them, our perceptions began to shift," says Wholey. "Animals ask nothing of us except for a treat or toy every now and then, and they give so freely of themselves with no strings attached."

According to a 2006 national survey by the American Veterinary Medical Association, over 75 percent of households in the United States own a pet. Nearly half, or 49 percent, of pet owners consider their pets to be family members and 48.2 percent consider them to be companions. These statistics reveal the positive impact animals have on our lives and the importance of what has become known as the human-animal bond.

The term "human-animal bond" was coined in 1977 by three veterinarians and a psychologist who, along with others, founded the Delta Society. The Delta Society was the first organization to fund formal

research examining the importance of animals to our overall health and well-being. Since then, numerous scientific studies have demonstrated both the physical and psychological benefits of pet interaction.

Companion animals are often who we turn to as a support system during stressful periods of our lives. “Our pets are all accepting and endearing. They give their whole existence to their people,” says Peg. “Everyone else judges us but our animals just love us with all our faults.”

Because of this deep bond, the loss of an animal companion can be devastating. According to Wholey, researchers discovered that although individuals may share similarities with respect to the grief ‘process,’ each person is unique, grieving in their own time and in their own way. Guilt, denial, anger, depression and sorrow are common after losing a pet, and it is important to acknowledge and express the emotions experienced as a result of ones’ loss.

When faced with a pet’s euthanasia, responses to grief may be intensified, thereby causing confusion, increased guilt and questioning the final choice. Even veterinary professionals, who often help clients cope with euthanasia decisions in their professional capacity, sometimes question themselves when confronting euthanasia of their own pet. This uncertainty is a normal part of the grieving process.

Looking back, Peg said the one thing that stands out in her mind now was her own lack of objectivity. “It’s difficult to come to terms when you have an animal that means so much to you,” says Peg. “You rationalize. You can fool yourself into not seeing things as clearly as you should.”

In Wholey’s experience, those who must consider this agonizing decision do so out of their consideration for the well-being, comfort, and quality of life of their beloved animal companion- that comes from a place of pure, unselfish love.

Memorializing a pet is an important part of the healing process and should not be dismissed or viewed as trivial. Peg says the handmade oak urn she has for Lucas’ ashes holds a place of honor on their fireplace mantel and is a resting place of beauty, which brought her comfort and healing.

There are many other ways to pay tribute to a beloved pet, such as planting a tree or flower garden, assembling a photo album, writing a story or poem, or by making a memorial donation to help animals in need.

Peg still misses the “smile” Lucas greeted her with whenever she returned home, even if she was gone only 10 minutes. She misses Lucas snuggling in her lap while she knitted and the yarn lay across his face. But reliving these memories provides comfort and will always keep Lucas in her heart.

## **A New Way to Honor Your Pet Now Online**

Life is different after a pet dies. Like many who devote their lives to animals, Our Companions webmaster, Angie Pugliese, has lost a few special friends during her lifetime. Along the way there is always one, like a soul-mate, who tugs at your heart just a bit harder than others and leaves a deeper emptiness behind. For Angie, it was her sweet Ally.



Ally, an “old soul” cat with a quiet and accepting demeanor, roamed the streets alone in search of food and warm shelter—homeless and frightened—before she found her way into Angie’s heart. Trust came slowly at first, then warmth, and safety. Ally had found her forever home.

When Ally passed away recently, Angie searched within for a meaningful way to honor her memory. The answer appeared via the computer screen in front of her- the Our Companions Web site Angie lovingly creates.

“What better way for me to keep Ally’s memory alive than to make a financial donation to Our Companions,” says Angie, “A place where I know my gift will help other cats just like her.” Soon, Angie’s friends joined in, making donations in Ally’s name.

These thoughtful gifts helped Angie through the healing process, not only by demonstrating she had friends who love her, but also by their contribution for animals in need. “It meant the world to me,” says Angie, who recognized the importance of continuing the cycle.

Out of her friends’ empathy, an idea was born. Angie developed an online memorial portion of the Our Companions Web site for posting tributes and donations in honor of beloved pets. Similar to an online message board, once a tribute is listed, friends and family members can be invited to share their thoughts and memories.

New personalized tributes may be added at any time. A link to the printable form for donations by fax or phone is also located on the memorial site.

Angie’s creation of the Our Companions memorial web page is just one of the many opportunities to honor the precious lives of our animal companions. At the sanctuary land in Ashford, future plans are in place for the construction of a reflection garden which will include a tribute stone walkway.

Life is different after a pet dies. But Angie knows first hand the impact remembrance gifts can have.