

Somehow Over the Rainbow

By Cindy Bundy

Spring is here and with it comes the pure warmth of the sun as it gently awakens the delicate, fragrant flowers and all the wild babies of feather and fur. Spring is a time of birth, life, awakenings. Just as spring brings life, winter brings darker days, cold nights and death. The winter usually brings about a higher incident of canine deaths, and this winter was no exception. Many of us lost one of our beloved Stafford friends over the past few months. Death is inevitable. We can't cheat it, we can't hide from it, we can't change the fact that it will and does happen. When it happens to one of our beloved dogs, it brings with it a roller coaster of emotions. Unlike the death of a human loved one, many people don't know how to grieve the loss of their four-legged friend.

We all deal with grief in many ways. Some people hide their sadness. They feel no one will understand that they are devastated at the passing of their canine companion. They may feel that it is not right to compare the death of their dog to that of Aunt Betty or Grandfather Paul, even though they hurt so bad they can barely breathe.

There are those who grieve so intensely for their pet that they can barely get out of bed in the morning. They withdraw into profound depression and feel they will never be the same person they were before their loss. They too feel no one would understand how a dog could affect one so deeply.

Many fall in between. Still unsure how they should feel. We have all heard people say they will never get another dog again. The hurt is just too much. Others go out right away and get a new dog. Not to replace the one that died, but just because the thought of not having a dog, or two or three is just unfathomable.



There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief is like a jigsaw puzzle of a heart with a huge piece missing. Yes, grief comes in stages, but it is not set in stone which stage you experience first or if you will even experience all of them. The five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. When your dog dies, of course you are sad. Sadness is experienced by practically everyone who suffers a loss to death. You need to know that it is okay to be sad. It is okay to cry, yes, even for a dog. It is okay to feel as sad at the death of your dog as you were at losing any human you know. The loss of a pet can be just as hard to process as that of a human and there is absolutely nothing wrong with feeling that way. Recent studies show that some people grieve harder and longer for a pet than they do for a human counterpart. Why, because a dog gives you it's all. It gives you love, it gives you companionship, it gives you a sense of responsibility without conditions. All it asks is that you feed it and nurture it and love it. During the many years I was a child grief facilitator, I found that the children would talk about the loss of a pet before they would talk about their parent or sibling who died. You also need to know that it is okay to be happy. It is okay to laugh, to socialize with friends and it is okay to get another dog right away. It is also okay not to get another dog. It is okay to wait until you feel comfortable getting another pet if and when you are ready.



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Denial is a strange feeling. We don't want to believe our dear dog is dying or has died. It just doesn't seem real. You want to wake up from that bad dream and everything be what it was before that fateful day. Your sweet Stafford at your side, smiling up at you with that big goofy grin. Then reality sets in and you can't deny that your wonderful companion is gone, forever. How many times have you heard your dog walking down the hall or give a woof to come in the house even though they have been dead for weeks. How many times have you caught a glimpse of your dog out of the corner of your eye. You swear he was there. I believe they are there. I believe they come back just to let you know they are still with you. In your heart and in your memories, today, tomorrow and forever. I take great comfort in those phantom sightings.

You are angry at the Vet for not doing more. You are angry at your family and friends because they don't understand how you can be so upset about a dog. You are angry because no one wants to talk to you about Rover, when all you want to do is talk about the dog that shared so much of your life. A dog who made you who you are. A dog that you were proud of and loved to your very core. Anger at others, anger at yourself. You can even be angry at your loving

Stafford that just died, just because he died. If family and friends don't understand, fine. They are probably very uncomfortable talking about death, any death. Death is not an easy subject to talk about. It brings feeling to the surface that they may have suppressed for some time. Talking to you about your dog dying may bring up painful memories for them. Try not to be too hard on those people. They may think that talking about your dog will make you sad, and they don't want you to be sad. Then there are those just plain, cold people, who never had any love for any animal. I pity those people who never knew the love of a dog. I may not want to be friends with them, but pity them, I do.

We all bargain whether we like to or not. Why did my dog have to die? Why him or her? I loved her so much. I tried everything I could do to save him. Why did the repairman leave the gate open? Why did I not have my dog in a crate in the car? Why didn't I realize my dog was that sick? Why did I not get to the Vet sooner? Why did it have to happen to me? Why didn't the veterinarian find a cure? Why didn't I spend more money on treatment? Why did I spend so much money? Why didn't I do more? Why didn't he pass in his sleep. Did I euthanize too soon? Why? Why? Why?



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The anger, the guilt. It all comes rushing at you. You can't stop the feelings, they come in waves. The shoulda, woulda, coulda's of life. We have all been there. What you need to know is you did all you could. If treatment was so expensive that you would put yourself into an unsurmountable debt, then you have to sit back and tell yourself that you did what you could with what you had. Stop beating yourself up over that. Accidents happen too. You can't change what happened, even though in your mind, that is exactly what you do, over and over and over again.

Finally there is acceptance. We all must accept what happens, whether we want to or not. The acceptance may come right away, or it may take years. For some it will never come. They say time heals all wounds. Time lessens the pain but you never really get over it. We always tell the children that you get through grief, not over it. Think about grief as a giant snowdrift. Looking at it is overwhelming. This giant wall of sadness and pain. You think that you will never get over it. And that is true. If you try to climb on top of the drift, you keep falling through the crust of the snow. It wears you out and you feel like quitting, you feel like you are drowning in sorrow. But if you slowly take one step at a time

and break the crust as you walk, you will get through the drift. You never get over, but you do get through it.

When I went through grief training we talked about any difference in losing a pet as opposed to losing a person. We came to the conclusion that the only real difference was that with a pet you don't say "If only Fluffy was here to see the first grandchild" or "Too bad Spot never got to see the new house". You don't say "Rocky missed the wedding of Cousin Jim". We all felt that losing a pet can be just as devastating as losing a person, especially to someone who has no human family near. For our dogs are family and we do love them immensely.

So what can you do to get through that massive drift of grief? First, forgive yourself. You did all you could, period. Yes, maybe you could have spent thousands on treatment. Yes, maybe you could have double checked the gate. Yes, maybe you could have gotten to the Vet sooner, but that doesn't change the past. That also doesn't make you a bad person. So forgive yourself, you did nothing wrong. Find family and friends who feel the same way you do about animals. They can be a huge support network for you. Whether it is in person or on social media, seek people who you



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know are open to talking to you about your dog. Make a memorial for your pet. I have a memorial wall where I hang pictures and collars. I have a beautiful tabletop chest that I put special keepsakes of my dogs that have died. I open it and reflex on why those items were so special to me. You can use a wall, a table top, a shelf, or a chest or box. Light on candle, donate to a shelter or medical research in your dogs name. I wear memorial necklaces that I have engraved with my dogs names. Inside I have a bit of their hair. You can use cremains. I, for some reason, want something with their DNA, so I go with hair. The weight of the pendant is comforting to me. I catch myself just holding the pendant in my hand and it makes me smile as I think of my dogs. I recently had a friend comment on my pendants. She wanted to know if it was odd to make one while her dog was still alive. Of course it is okay. Wearing a pendant with your dogs hair means they are always with you. When that fateful day arrives and you have to say goodbye, your dog is already with you, around your neck, close to your heart.

Remember you are not alone. There is always someone out there who has

experienced what you have. It is not the same, for it is different for everyone, but knowing you are not alone in your thoughts and feelings can be a great help on your road to healing. Know that what you are feeling is normal. As the children at group would say, a new normal. One without your beloved pet. You also need to recognize that if your sadness is so intense that you think you can't possibly go on, you may need to consider outside help. Whether it be in the form of bereavement groups, counseling or therapy. It is not a sign of weakness or shame to seek professional help.

If you get a call from a friend who lost a pet and is having a hard time, never tell them to get over it, because you don't. Never tell them it is only a dog. It is not, it was an integral part of the family dynamics. Never tell them enough time has passed, for grief has no time limit. Never push another dog on that person. When the time is right, they will know it. Do, however, be there for them. Don't judge what that person did or did not do for their dog during their illness or accident. Don't judge if they didn't mortgage their home to pay for expensive medical treatments.



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Don't judge if the dog died as the result of an accident, whether at home or in a vehicle, for they are feeling enough guilt. Offer condolences, send a loving note, make a phone call, give a hug. We all know our wonderful Staffords don't live anywhere near as long as we wish they would, so cherish them for the time you have with them. Love them for who they are. Treasure their memory when they are gone and be there for each other when that beautiful life is no longer on this earth. We all know the poem "The Rainbow Bridge". I want to believe that somewhere over the rainbow I will see all my fabulous dogs again, for how can it be heaven if they are not there!



This memorial jewelry came from Perfect Memorials. They offer a huge selection, have great prices & fast service.

Most colleges and universities that have veterinary schools, offer pet bereavement services. You don't have to live in the state of the college to utilize their services.



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*Just this side of heaven is a place called
Rainbow Bridge.*

*When an animal dies that has been especially
close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow
Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of
our special friends so they can run and play
together. There is plenty of food, water and
sunshine, and our friends are warm and
comfortable.*

*All the animals who had been ill and old are
restored to health and vigor. Those who were hurt
or maimed are made whole and strong again,
just as we remember them in our dreams of days
and times gone by. The animals are happy and
content, except for one small thing; they each miss
someone very special to them, who had to be left
behind.*

*They all run and play together, but the day
comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the
distance. His bright eyes are intent. His eager
body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the
group, flying over the green grass, his legs
carrying him faster and faster.*

*You have been spotted, and when you and your
special friend finally meet, you cling together in
joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The
happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands
again caress the beloved head, and you look once
more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long
gone from your life but never absent from your
heart.*

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together....

