

# Departed Friend

A newsletter for people bereaved by the loss of an animal

5 Muirfield, Luton, Beds. United Kingdom. LU2 7SB

Tel: 01582 512184

e-mail: [departedfriend@btinternet.com](mailto:departedfriend@btinternet.com)

Blogsite: <http://departedfriend.wordpress.com>

Website: <http://departedfriend.weebly.com>

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## Saying Goodbye

At the end of May, Marie Irvine, Assistant Producer of Channel 4's 4thought.tv, contacted me say that they were covering the subject of pet bereavement again, and to ask if I knew of anyone who had given their pet a funeral service who might be interested in speaking to her about it. She was also seeking someone who had lost an animal in the very recent past who might be prepared to share that with them.

I don't know if they are still looking, but if anyone who did not receive my email is interested, please let me know, giving me your contact details to pass on to Marie. 4thought.tv is a 2-minute slot covering interesting weekly topics every evening on Channel 4.

Watch out for the companion animal bereavement topic, on the internet or in television listings magazines.

*My email elicited the following thoughts – some identifying details in the second comment have been changed to protect confidentiality:*



This is a subject that is important to me. I have not held a funeral service for any of my dogs but they have all been cremated and are still here at home with their photos in front of the urns!

I really do not understand why people think people like me are strange/weird/mad to do this. For me my dogs have been a very important part of my life and my best friends and deserve the best treatment at the end too!

**Maureen Shbero**



I was so angry at my friend when a few months ago her dachshund had to be PTS. She went with her son to the vet and they left Roley alone at the vet to be PTS. I could not and still do not understand how anyone could do that. This little dog had given so much love and affection and then they just left him there looking out the window to them as they walked away! I have never responded verbally when she has mentioned it, as she did when we were visiting recently. I think if I did I would say something she did not want to hear.

I only had Maxie a very short time when I realised that the surgery had not helped and the kindest thing was to PTS. I stayed with him all the time and my partner was by my side. I wanted Maxie to see me and know that he was going with our love.

**Sarah**



It is well known that funerals or other kinds of ceremonial ritual and commemoration of a lost loved one is helpful to the grieving process and it is good to know that there is now increasing recognition that this can be equally true when we lose a companion animal.

Far from being "strange/weird/mad" to preserve the memory of her dogs in this way, Maureen is responding naturally, logically and appropriately to the loss of her best friends. Animals love us unconditionally and – unlike many human friends or relations – are with us 24 hours a day, totally dependent on us for their wellbeing. They bring out our nurturing instinct and interact with us in all manner of subtle (and not so subtle) ways to show us their affection. It is no wonder, then, that the bond can be deep and, when it is lost, it can feel shattering.

Sarah's feelings about the perceived abandonment of Roley at the vet's at the end of his last journey are understandable. It must have been heartrending for her to imagine him staring out of the window, deserted by the people he had loved, never to return.

The question of whether or not to stay when an animal is put to sleep is a complex one and there is no "one size fits all" answer. Many people, like Sarah with Maxie, feel impelled to stay - as Sarah puts it so well:

*"I wanted him to see me and know that he was going with our love".*

For others, it might be too much to bear and, arguably, if they panicked or became distressed, it could upset the animal and possibly also make things hard for the vet. These people choose not to stay. As George says:

*"I want to remember him as he was".*

## KHUSH

Some people who choose not to stay do make arrangements for a burial or cremation afterwards, and may collect the ashes from the surgery.

Others may entrust the vet to make all the arrangements and then walk away. This may be because they would find any continued involvement or reminders too painful – or because the animal simply was not sufficiently important in their lives to warrant any further action.

It may be that non-human animals have a more philosophical attitude to death than we do, accepting that their time has now come, especially if they are very uncomfortable, ill or infirm. Many of us will be familiar with that look they give us which says:

*"I've had enough – please now let me go".*

Whether or not we choose to stay with them as they make the transition, we can be sure that our selfless act, which can cause us so much pain, has given them a peaceful release.



## Euthanasia criteria

The book **Absent Friend – Coping with the loss of your pet** by Laura & Martyn Lee\*\* contains the following information, which might be helpful when having to make those agonising decisions:

*Andrew Edney, a vet and past president of the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, has suggested a series of questions to help vets and owners to decide when the animal's quality of life has become inadequate and whether or not to opt for euthanasia. If the answer to any of these questions is "No" and treatment is unlikely to help, euthanasia might be the preferred action to take.*

### **Is the animal**

- free from pain, distress or serious discomfort which cannot be effectively controlled
- able to walk and balance reasonably well
- able to eat and drink enough for normal maintenance without much difficulty and without vomiting
- free from tumours which cause pain or serious discomfort and are judged inoperable or otherwise untreatable
- able to breathe without much difficulty
- able to urinate and defecate reasonably frequently without serious difficulty or incontinence

### **and is the owner**

- able to cope physically and emotionally with any nursing or medication that may be required.

\*\*ISBN 1 85054 089 6. From CPC, A505 Main Road, Thriplow Heath, Nr Royston, Herts. SG8 7RR. Tel: 01763 208 295. Price £4.45 or £5.45 incl. postage & packing.

*Would you please include a dedication in your next newsletter for our cat who had to be put to sleep on 15 April?*

We adopted Khush, along with another cat Kitty, 3 years ago. Khush (Hindi for "happy") was 15 and Kitty was 12. We adopted both from a local sanctuary where they had been dumped by their previous owners. They were in the sanctuary for 9 months. We chose them because we wanted to care for two older cats that probably didn't stand a chance of being adopted. We lost Kitty about 2 years ago, she was such a sweet soul.

Khush was a difficult cat and hated our other cat Blossom. It took her 2 years to discover the kitchen! She came with lots of emotional baggage but with love and patience she trusted us and eventually loved sitting on our laps.

She developed gingivitis and had to have some teeth removed and after a while her mouth got worse. We had an x-ray done which showed she had cancer of the jaw (she kept pawing her mouth and making it bleed). We made the decision to have her pts while under the anaesthetic, we said our goodbyes and kissed her silken head.

We have her ashes so she's back with us. I've left her bed on the windowsill where she loved to sleep and warm her old bones. Khush went with love – goodbye my beloved ginger girl – forever in our hearts.



Sharon Hopkins, Oxford

## Condolences



*To Joolz on the loss of her beloved Gizmo,  
long-time companion and special cat ~  
pts to prevent suffering at the end of a  
terminal illness.*



## Cats, Cats, Cats!

Diane Bramson has compiled an anthology of poems called "Cats, Cats, Cats!" to raise money for Cats Protection - all the poems are original and unpublished. One of the poems is reproduced on the next page. If you would like to receive the anthology by email or post in return for a donation please contact Diane. Her email address is [catanthology@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:catanthology@yahoo.co.uk) and her postal address is 20 Pasteur Close, London NW9 5HQ.

# Choosing Kitten's Name

by Cindy Holland

Dad bought home a surprise one day it was a little kitten,  
We crowded round this tiny friend in our nice warm kitchen.  
'What is his name?' asked brother Tom, our faces all looked blank,  
'We'll have to see what suits him best', said our cousin Frank.

'His paws are white so Socks would suit', said our neighbour Jane,  
'Oh no', said Mum 'that's not the one, it's really much too plain'.  
'Let's think on it', said Dad that night giving him some chicken,  
So off to bed we all went thinking names for our new kitten.

When I got up I had to laugh at what was there to greet me,  
Our kitten curled up snug and warm as cosy as can be,  
In one of Dad's boots he calls shoes at least a size eleven.  
'I know', said Tom 'A daft idea', his face began to redden,

And picking up the partner shoe and checking it for marks,  
'I know the perfect name', he said, 'We'll call the kitten Clarkes'.



## It's good to talk – isn't it?

Some years ago, a friend and I collaborated on setting up a workshop for people who had undergone a particular kind of human loss that can be difficult to talk about. The idea was that they could come together and share experiences in a safe, non-judgemental atmosphere. The workshop was to be facilitated by my friend, who herself had personal experiences of this type of loss. I did the administration and she spread the word, contacting a number of people she thought would be interested. We sat back to await the response.

To our surprise, not one person signed up and the idea had to be abandoned. We wondered why.....

More recently, the same thing happened when two people, quite independently of each other in different geographical areas, tried to set up support groups for people who had lost companion animals.

People often tell me that what helped them most in their bereavement was to discover that they are not alone in feeling excruciating pain when their beloved companion animal has died. They have derived comfort from reading other people's tributes to their departed friends (whether in print or by email) in DF newsletters. This has been particularly beneficial for people who are isolated and have no-one to talk to and also for those whose family and friends do not understand.

So, it would be natural to assume that anyone suffering in this way, feeling isolated and / or unable to talk to friends, family or colleagues, would welcome the chance to share experiences with other people who had been through a comparable experience and felt a similar degree of pain – and would therefore respect their feelings and not judge or ridicule them.

Some benefits that people can derive from support groups have been identified by the Mayo Clinic; these include:

- Feeling less lonely, isolated or judged
- Gaining a sense of empowerment and control
- Improving your coping skills and sense of adjustment
- Talking openly and honestly about your feelings
- Reducing distress, depression or anxiety
- Developing a clearer understanding of what to expect with your situation

I believe that, in the case of companion animal bereavement, it could be very comforting to meet and talk with people in similar situations and to know that it is perfectly normal to feel such depths of sorrow.

I know it helped me back in 1986, before the subject was much talked about, and before the advent of easily accessible pet bereavement counselling and support. I needed help and I tried to find somewhere that could provide it.

I found out that the Society for Companion Animal Studies is a UK-based membership charity dedicated to understanding how interactions between people and companion animals can improve quality of life and well-being. It had not yet set up its Pet Bereavement Support Service, but its members would certainly understand the pain and be able to offer comfort.

So I attended a SCAS conference, where I met warm, empathetic people – veterinary surgeons, scientists, pet-owners, who reassured me that what I was going through was normal. I no longer felt isolated, surrounded as I was by people who had themselves experienced comparable pain.

I will always remember the lady who hugged me as we cried together over the losses of our respective pets (she for her dog and me for Tiger, my cat). I am also indebted to the vet who told me she had never had a cat recover from dropsy and that euthanasia had indeed been the right decision for Tiger. Up till that time, I had been only 99% certain and she gave me the extra 1% that I needed in order to 'move on'.



Why, then, might some people be reluctant to attend a pet bereavement support group?

- Ease of access to the internet might play a part; there is no need to be apprehensive about meeting total strangers and you can access the support from the privacy of your own home
- Even if a group is local, transport might be a problem for people with low income and/or mobility issues
- Lack of trust: people who are not used to socialising, or who have suffered insensitive reactions to their loss, might fear ridicule or breach of confidentiality even in this situation
- Shyness or self-consciousness might play a part
- Isolation: some people might be so isolated that they do not hear about the group
- The publicity might not reach everyone who could benefit
- Some people simply prefer to get through it in private, or by means of one-to-one support

There may also be other reasons why support groups do not appeal to everyone. But I believe they have the potential to offer a tremendous source of comfort to those who are willing to give them a try.

What do you think? Would a support group be helpful to you in time of sorrow? Have you ever accessed such a group? Have you ever run one?

Please let *Departed Friend* know your thoughts so that there can be a follow-up discussion of this topic in a future edition of the newsletter.



## LITERATURE

### By post or by email:

*(To request this free literature, please send an email or self-addressed stamped A5 envelope. If you want a large number of items, or if you want to get the newsletter regularly by post, a donation would be welcomed, if your means permit):*

- Quarterly newsletters
- Newsletter index and list of contents
- Poems
- Resource list
- What is *Departed Friend*?
- Rainbow Bridge  
*(2 versions: male or female animal)*
- When the time comes ... to say goodbye  
*(burial or cremation options)*
- Flyer  
*(information about services offered)*
- Business card  
*(information about services offered)*

## BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

- telephone support: 7pm-9pm  
*most weekday evenings*
- support by text to mobile phone
- email support
- support by letter
- face-to-face support by arrangement  
Luton area: Bedfordshire, England  
*(currently free, but donation welcomed)*

## OTHER RESOURCES

Please contact DF (by phone or email, or by post: sending an SAE to the address at the top of this newsletter) if you would like a copy of the bereavement resources list.