

A Life Well-Grieved -- a memorial talk for pet survivors, to benefit the USPCPA

Good afternoon.

It is such an honor to be included in this sacred gathering to raise funds for the UCSPCA and raise awareness of the depth of our connection to our fur covered, four-legged family members.

It is strange to give a talk about grief because in its acute stages, the experience of grief transports us beyond words. I remember riding the subway back to work after a significant loss. I was still so raw -- and acutely aware that everyone else was living their normal lives, thinking about their to do lists and various obsessions, while I was wrapped inside in a grief bubble -- an alternate reality in which time moved more slowly and my mind had little capacity for composed thoughts or minutiae.

So we will try to give words to the wordless. And if you think about it, the relationship we have with our pets also transports us beyond words. Because we share limited language, the connection we can experience with them is so distinct and so pure.

Animals are teachers of love, responsibility, death and letting go. For many children, their first experience of death is through losing a pet -- a cat or a dog -- or even a goldfish, hamster, frog, or butterfly.

Animals teach us about death in this way and do the profound work of modeling for us the limitations of our own physicality. How many of you had your first experience of death with a critter of some sort?

Take a minute to remember it.

Do you remember the shoe-box burial, the limp goldfish swirling in the toilet bowl, or the dead firefly in the jar? Do you remember the mind racing, trying to wrap itself around the concept of what it means to die?

My dear friend and mentor often says: “A life well grieved is a life well lived.”

Upon first hearing, that may seem somewhat morose. But in reality, grief is a part of our everyday experience, and a big part of letting go. We not only encounter the Big Losses like death, divorce, and moving, but we also suffer lesser or minor losses on a daily basis: the pants no longer fitting; the promising business venture that never quite takes off; the closure of our favorite restaurant. So it is always around us, we are always attaching to things and letting go. Since loss is a natural and daily occurrence, making peace with it and with the process of grieving is to our advantage.

"A life well grieved is a life well lived." The statement begs the question: Well . . . What does it really mean to grieve well?

Our dear neighbor, teacher and author Elizabeth Lesser answers it in her book *Broken Open*.

“There is an art to grieving. To grieve well the loss of anything - a parent, a love, a child, a home a job, a pet -- is a creative act. It takes attention and patience and courage. But many of us do not know how to grieve. We were never taught, and we don't see examples of full-bodied grieving around us. Our culture favors the fast-food model of mourning -- get over it quick and get back to work, affix the badge of "closure" and move on.”

If you have suffered a great loss, especially that of a pet, you may know the tension of the pull from our minds and loved ones for things to get back to normal vs. the heart's desire to shatter over the loss. Yet deep down we know that cutting the pain short in order to get back to normal does not honor the profound love and impact our furry friends had on us.

In the world of psychology there is a belief that in your first experience of loss forms the blueprint of how you grieve. So if you think back to that first time you encountered death, you may learn something about how you learned to grieve.

Psychology also posits that all of your unfinished losses are present in your current loss -- Another reason to grieve well. If we fully grieve our present losses – our futures ones will not be laden with unhealed wounds.

One way to make sure that the grieving process is thorough is through ritual: Gatherings like these. Setting aside special places and times where we get to reflect on our love and what we have lost.

Lesser also shares with us that having patience with our feelings of grief, not rushing to fill the empty space but to allow what is emerging to emerge -- ultimately builds our strength, presence and capacity to live life more fully. I believe that it gives us the courage to love our furry friends without reserve.

Furthermore, grieving in essence is the way we humans let go. It is a path, a vehicle, a necessary threshold. Lao Tzu says, "The world is won by those who let it go."

If we do not really honor the pain of letting go or attempt to avoid it, we conversely become very attached to it. Then we become like the monkey and the banana:

A monkey reaches his hand down into a hole to grab a banana, and his hand gets caught in a trap at the wrist. He can free himself by sliding his hand out of the vice if he lets go of the banana. But he doesn't let it go -- depriving himself of the freedom to move around and find other bananas.

Through ritual, contemplation, patience, breathing fully -- we allow the banana to slip through our fingers. We feel the emptiness of our hands, and embrace our wholeness once more.

And what we see is that when we really let go, we are left with what can never die: Our memories.

The miracle of these little critters is that they crawl inside our hearts, past all our defenses, and magically, effortlessly open them.

The ultimate miracle of letting go is that we can experience our pets in our hearts when their bodies are no longer in our homes. In this way, as the Taoists might say, we win the world.

Animals are leaders: they go first. They shepherd us along on our own path to physical termination, and teach us how to love, let go, and move on -- all the richer for having done so.