

Good Grief

By Corey Van't Haaff

WHEN FREDA DIED, I WAS LOST. SHE HAD BEEN MY FRIEND, MY CONFIDANTE, my source of courage, my entertainment, my protector, my driving buddy, my baby. I went on automatic pilot. In my family, cremation is the usual practice, and I planned the same for her. But I couldn't hold a funeral. Who would come to a funeral for a dog? And what would they say?

For better or for worse, I have had a fair bit of experience dealing with death. One grandfather died when I was a toddler. My Nana died when I was in my pre-teen years. Less than two years later, my mom died, just as I hit puberty. Another grandpa in my early twenties and, more recently, my little brother passed away not long after I turned 40. Dotted throughout this timeline have been the deaths of other people on the periphery of my life, though, no doubt, the centre of someone else's.

Each passing followed a similar trajectory. There's the notification—the dreaded phone call. Learning of the death. Reacting. Crying. Then, usually, some remembering, followed by a funeral where there is even more crying and remembering.

And always, for me, there were other people around me—others to share my grief and feel my loss. For the most part, death itself is easy. Someone else dies; you live. And there's the rub.

It's living with grief that is the more difficult part of the equation. Grief can be a burden, especially at the beginning, and any burden becomes lighter when it's shared. During the days or weeks that follow the death of a beloved person, people are fairly forgiving of crying jags and errant reminiscences. They will hug you, cook for you, spend time just listening to you.

It's a little different when the dearly departed is a dog. Not everyone *gets* the totality of the loss. When people say, "It was only a dog," don't argue. Don't blame them for not understanding. The reality is, their lives are the poorer for the absence of this type of love in their life.

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Grief expressed over the loss of a dog is not really any different than grief over the loss of a human companion. Lynne Mann, registered psychologist with Tri-City Psychology Services in Port Moody, B.C., says the quality of the pet-human relationship and the depth of emotional investment determine the depths and lengths of grieving. Individual styles apply as in any relationship.

"There is a cultural expectation that the length of grieving may be shortened by replacing the relationship with a new pet. Hopefully, this is not an expectation of human-to-human relationship loss. Pet owners know replacing a pet too soon is not needed. Grieving is a necessary and healthy process. As one grieves, the emotional energies involved in the relationship gradually shift and one is able to "put away" the sadness and have more available energy for a next stage in life," she explains.

Grief manifests itself in many different ways, Mann says. People may describe grief as mental pain, distress, or sorrow. Others say it's a bitter regret or remorse. Most often, sadness is a major component.

"Perhaps what distinguishes ordinary sadness from grief," said Mann, "are the occasional and repetitive bursts of sadness that seem to engulf the griever, at times when other events and activities are ongoing."

I found it tough to say good-bye to Freda without the ritual of a funeral. It's difficult to find peace inside when grief is such a personal journey. One of my friends, after Freda died, wanted to do something to celebrate her spirit. She gave some money to Freda's veterinarian and asked that it be used to offset the expenses of a dog owner who perhaps couldn't afford veterinary care. The condition was that the vet tell that person all about Freda. It was a gesture that warmed my heart and today, some 11 years later, still brings a tear to my eye.

It's important, Mann explains, that you

allow the feelings of grief. Don't judge or repress them.

"As you wash out the dishes, clean out the hair for a last time, give away the food—feel the sadness," she says. "Second, remember the ties. Look at pictures. Talk with friends, normalize your feelings. Keep going on walks with your pet friends. Go to the pet shows you used to go to. Your natural supports are there."

For many people, a specific memorial gives them comfort. There are garden stones with your dog's name and important dates, and portraits of your dearly departed, and even memory boxes filled with the cremains of your dog along with a favourite toy, collar, or leash.

I keep all my dogs' ashes; it's the way I remember them. I feel strangely comforted by knowing I can open the special drawer in the bedroom and see Freda and Omega and Miranda. Of course, I have photos around the house, and I do have a video, but have only been able to watch it once.

Memory, says Mann, affords us the opportunity to commune with our internal emotional realities. By facing our feelings, without judgment, we are allowing a natural process to take place.

One of the saddest truisms when it comes to dogs is that we will, in all likelihood, outlive them. There is room in my special drawer for the ashes of more dogs. I know that over time, my five lively, lovely dogs will ultimately die and be confined to urns and will take their place beside the others. And I know that one day; I too will die and will be cremated. And that on that day, I will finally be reunited with my girls who meant so much to me while I was living and that our ashes will be mixed and released together. It is this thought that gives me peace. ■

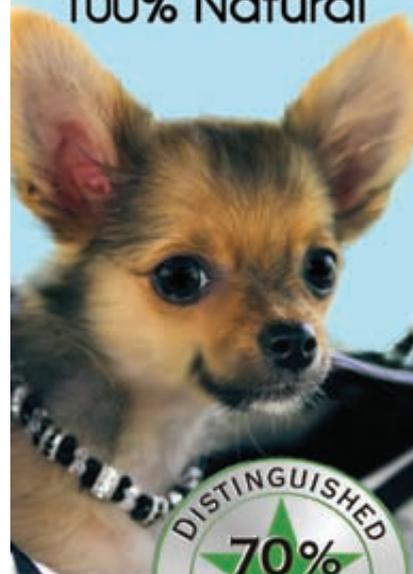
Corey Van't Haaff owns Cohiba Communications, and lives and writes with her five dogs in Port Coquitlam. She laughs daily at the antics of Esmerelda, Tallula, Clara, Stella, and Matilda and cannot imagine being any happier than she is right now.

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