

Overview

“I never cried this much when my family member died,” and “I knew it was going to hurt, but I didn’t think it would be this bad” are two frequently expressed sentiments of grief for a loved animal companion. In the twenty years that I’ve worked with grieving pet parents, I’ve listened to stories and seen, heard, and felt profound grief. I’ve been a witness to the journey of grief for a beloved companion animal, and I’ve experienced my own grief. I’ve learned that healing can come.

This book is a witness to the lived experience of grief for the loss of a companion animal. When I use the term “lived experience,” I mean living with and through an experience with all the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that accompany that event. The importance, depth, and extent of pet loss grief is described and reflected through personal stories and vignettes of pet loss experiences. I tell my stories of my own pet losses and weave them through the book as a way to both personalize the book and engage you, the reader.

The scripture passage from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 serves as a unifying theme and grounds the book:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

a time to rend, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace.

I’ve selected this passage for several reasons.

First, it’s one of my favorites, and it feels natural in a book about living through the experience of pet loss. One of the themes in this book is that of chronological time and its relationship to the experience of loss. In interviews, one-on-one sessions, and support groups, people have consistently discussed their grief in terms of time. There’s a temporal quality to their descriptions. Time has been a marker. Time has been contextual. In conversation after conversation, I’ve heard references to the time before the animal’s death, the time surrounding the actual death, and the time after the death. Specific references to events are delineated and depicted in temporal terms. Second, this scripture is universal in its relationship and relevance to people of all spiritual faiths and practices. The passage links spirituality to life’s rhythms and events, to life’s ebb and flow, and to grief and healing regardless of one’s particular spiritual beliefs. Spirituality not only gives consciousness and meaning to our grief but also heals our grief. This passage helps to offer hope for healing and the belief that something positive can come from something sad and tragic. Because it transcends denominations and religions, I believe it helps interweave the experiential

and the spiritual. Several other themes are found throughout the book. The overriding theme is the lived experience of grief for a beloved companion animal, captured in the voices of those who grieve. I believe we can learn from others' experience. This book legitimizes the experience of grieving pet parents who look to have their feelings validated. It is my hope that when they read this book, they will see they are not alone in their feelings. Nor are they "crazy" for feeling their emotions or having their experiences.

This book is a tribute to the strength of the human-companion animal bond and the relationships people have with their pets. I use people's voices to reflect the depth of this bond. In fact, it's because of that depth of love between people and their companion animals that this book is needed.

The dimension of spirituality is also incorporated into the book. This is reflected not only in vignettes and quotations, but also in poetry and prayers. Spirituality includes an appreciation for the diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices. While grief includes tears, sorrow, and hurt, it can also mean coming closer to Spirit and God.

Another theme is that of hope. I offer the hope that, with time, healing can occur. The passage from Ecclesiastes holds out a spiritual basis of hope and reassurance. My own story, and those of others, reinforces the healing that can come from grief.

The experiences of pet loss captured in this book are not reflective of everyone. I know that. Some people who lose an animal have no connection to what is written here because their experiences are completely different. But what is described in this book does reflect the experiences of the hundreds of people with whom I've had the privilege of working. This book puts a face on their lived experience of pet loss and gives them a voice. It tells them clearly their grief does matter.