GRIEF - *A PART OF BEING HUMAN*
By Connie Toverud, B.A. (May 30, 2003)

Grief is a common human emotion. We easily associate the painful emotion of grief with the death of a person we have loved, but there are many other losses in our lives that cause us to mourn: loss of health, loss of an important relationship, loss of a job, loss of a childhood, loss of a close community. Not only is grief a universal emotion, it is a completely normal one. Grief's warm tears help heal the wounds of the loss and make room for renewed connection.

Perhaps one of the most acute losses for those who work in animal shelters, and one that is seldom acknowledged in society, is the loss of an animal.
For folks who devote their lives to the care of animals and the education of the public, the grief associated with the loss of an animal is an unavoidable experience..

Imagine, if you will, the grief that might be faced during the course of a single day in a shelter.

A cat is found dead in her cage in the morning. The cat was near death from starvation when brought in by an animal control officer several days earlier. It was immediately evaluated, given the name of Lucky, and placed in isolation. Even though there wasn't much left of Lucky but her purr, there was a spirit there that refused to die. She crept into the hearts of all who tried to nurse her back to health. Day after day people dropped by her cage just to hear the purr, an occasional weak meow, and to whisper, "Hang in there, kid." And then, one morning, she was dead, leaving behind the grief of those who had willed her to live.

Later that morning an adopted dog was returned to the shelter. The adoption counselor was stunned. Only three weeks ago she had spent many hours making sure that the family had gotten "just the right dog." Prior to adoption the dog had played with the children, been introduced to the other dog in the household with no problem, and the counselor had made sure that the parents understood the work involved with a new pet. Should problems arise, the family need only call the Help Line.

But what happened? The mother came in with the dog, two children in tow. The children sat on the floor with their arms around the dog, tears running down their cheeks, while Mom explained that the dog was "just too big a nuisance." The counselor tried to find out what the problem was in order to offer assistance. No luck.

"Please," the kids begged, "we'll be so good if you'll just let us keep him!"
"Shut up," said Mom, and dragged the kids out the door, leaving behind her not only the dog, but a counselor grieving the loss of a "forever home" for one more animal. And the children had just been denied a "forever friend."

As the family left, an elderly lady came through the door carrying a cat cage. She was sobbing as she placed the cage on the floor. "I can't keep her!! I have to move to Norway so my daughter can take care of me, and if Pooky came with me she would have to be in quarantine for 6 months in a cage by herself. I have had her for 19 years, she's my baby, and I can't do that to her. She's old and sick like me and all I wanted was to take care of her the rest of her life. Please, PLEASE let me hold her while you put her down. I want her to go knowing how much I love her." Grief, deep wrenching grief, confronted the receptionist who knows only too well the depth of pain involved in losing a pet who is a treasured family member.

Back in the kennel, the kennel techs are walking the five pit bulls that are being kept for evidence in an abuse case. It gets harder every day to walk the dogs. They all have scars on their necks and faces, one has lost an eye, and state law says that none can be adopted. With the love and attention they have received in the shelter over the many weeks they have been kept there, they are becoming socialized and greet the walkers with wagging tails and happy barks. The kennel techs know that when the court case is over those tails will wag on the way to the euthanasia room, and five dogs who had the right to be loved, not exploited, will be killed. At least they will expire humanely, not with a cheering throng betting on which will die first. There is a mixture of grief and frustration as the leashes are fastened to these trusting animals for their daily walk.

And in the euthanasia room there is a constant, but quiet and profound grief….. grief at losing the animals. In addition, there is grief around an ignorant or uncaring public. The folks whose job it is to end the life of these animals have feelings just as deep as anyone involved in animal care. Those who take on the responsibility of this particular duty face a major challenge in dealing with grief. It is one thing to gently end the life of animals too sick or injured to live, or too old for continued quality of life. That loss can be balanced by knowing that one has done a kindness for a creature in pain. It is a different matter to end the life of animals whose very existence is the product of irresponsibility on the part of the public. A public that will not neuter or spay their animals, a public that builds houses and parking lots on the habitat of wild animals struggling for existence, a public that will not financially support adoption centers so more animals have time to find homes, a public that thoughtlessly abandons animals on the roadside or tortures them in the name of sport.

In addition to the daily exposure to grief at work, animal care professionals lose their own pets as well.

"Is it harder to lose a child than a pet?"

I was asked this question by a woman who had loved and lost a cat after 17 years. I have lost both a child and a pet, but there is no yardstick to measure another person's pain and grief. Why does a pet "take over" so many lives? Because it gives us what we all need. Pets need to be cared for; people need to nurture. Pets provide companionship, acceptance without judgment, and unconditional love. Animals meet our need to touch

and be touched. All of us talk to our pets, and some share deep feelings not shared with any person.

When a pet dies we have lost a member of our family. For many people an animal, or animals, may be their only family. Getting another pet does not replace the one that died. Each animal has its own personality, just as we do. The loss of that unique being needs to be grieved. In time, one's heart may open to another animal.

During the SSACP Compassion Fatigue and Burnout Workshops, we teach that grief is part of being human, and we have been given our tears to express that grief for a reason. If we don't have permission or supportive ways to express our grief, if we have learned to deny our grief and stuff it down, it turns to bitterness, anger, and depression. We live in a society that doesn't make it easy to honor grief. This is especially acute in the animal sheltering world where one confronts not only the loss of so many loving creatures, but also society's obliviousness to the realities faced each day.

We know that shelter workers encounter grief in many forms in a single day. It is important to find ways to *acknowledge* it, *express* it, allow our tears to flow and give our feelings words. If you sense that a colleague is struggling with grief, ask about it, and listen. We can't fix it. We don't NEED to fix it, because nothing is wrong. Loss is part of being human, and we all have the tools to heal from loss: to shed the tears and tell the stories of grief. The gift and comfort we give one another is the listening.

We honor the animals when we grieve these losses. And we honor one another when we share our grief.

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