



Straja Linder King, board-certified clinical art therapist and clinical animal-assisted art therapist, with her two therapy dogs, Tangus and Tumbra (lying down). Tangus died unexpectedly shortly after this photo was taken and Tumbra passed within the same year. Sadly, he was only two and a half years old.

The **Sorrow** and **grief** surrounding the death of a pet

By Straja Linder King

Staring out the window of my cottage-like art studio, I am invited to a sensory feast of sounds and sights. A crow squawks, a jet roars on the celestial highway above while flocks of geese bark out commands overhead. The day is warm and teeming with life. We are at winter's end. Bravely, I slide the window even further to breathe in the clarity of the clear blue sky. The window becomes an interactive canvas inviting me to a private viewing. What do I see?

I see a constant interplay of beginnings and endings. Myriad stories unfold and shift, viewing life through this portal to the outside world. On the left hand side of the window an empty bird's nest sways precariously on the limb of the cherry tree. Across the yard, tangled branches shadow dance in the energetic winds and shifting light on my neighbour's

wall. On the cedar fence post a sassy magpie vies for the attention of my three dogs playing in the yard. Here as I sit staring out the window, I witness life and death comfortably entwined.

Birth and death are present always. Loss is inevitable yet we do not get the call to attention until the death impacts us directly. The death of a pet, a powerful call, impacts us with immediacy and full intensity. The death of a loving pet irrevocably changes us forever. The loss means one less family member and the pain can be debilitating. Put simply, grief is a broken heart. The absence of our beloved friend alters our home and hearts forever.

After working in pet bereavement for over two decades, I can clearly state that no two losses are alike. Grief is unique as one's fingerprint. From the moment that death occurs we feel a heaviness that defies description. Grief and gravity combined are unbearable to hold. No recipe will circumvent or eradicate

the pain due to the death of a beloved animal companion. The grieving process unfolds on its own volition and there are no short cuts. Ignoring or minimizing this grief falls into the category of disenfranchised grieving. What does this mean?

"Disenfranchised grief" means there is an existing social stigma to this type of death and the grieving process surrounding the loss. Depending on the bond, the death of an animal companion can wound our soul with the same intensity and magnitude as the grief we feel for a human death. Research demonstrates that the grief experienced due to pet loss can actually be higher than that of human loss — even if the pet has only been in our lives for a short while. This is due to the relationship, proximity, and deep bonds created with our beloved pet.

When we adopt, rescue, or add animal companions to our family we are well aware that their life span will most likely be shorter than

ours. However, this knowledge does little to lessen the pain of pet loss. Our head holds the logic about our longevity not being the same as our pets, yet our heart contains the feelings experienced together in our relationship with them. Hence, when people minimize or disregard the animal's death the grief intensifies. The term for this exacerbated grief is known as "disenfranchised", making the bereavement journey all the more difficult.

Therefore, validation is vital in assisting those experiencing the death of an animal companion. "Disenfranchised" best describes this type of grieving when the validation is lacking. For example saying: "It is only a pet," and "You can always get another," is hurtful and wounding to the soul. This thinking still exists and as a society, many are still not willing to honour this type of grief. An animal companion can never be replaced anymore than a lost human life and "getting another" sounds like restocking our fridge with depleted items. Our pets are members of the family too.

With the death of a pet many people live in the shadow of their grief. This merely exacerbates the grieving process. When time is not taken away from our work to allow for working through the loss, emotions become bottled up. All this stems from the fear of embarrassment in sharing what they are feeling. When you hear co-workers respond with: "It's just a dog, you can get another," or "Thank goodness it was only an animal," there is not much to say. This response simply perpetuates the stigma leaving the bereaved feeling isolated and filled with despair. No one should grieve alone.

Grief houses myriad responses, complicating the grieving process. The complexities may stem from a variety of sources such as unexpected deaths, witnessing a traumatic event, or feeling solely responsible for the death. Reactions to these types of complications affect us at every level — physical, emotional, spiritual, and social. We all grieve differently and we need to companion and support one another on the journey experienced due to loss.

We are evolving with sensitivity to this unspoken grief. Thankfully, I have lived to witness the journey of seeing the changes evolve. I will always remember the horrific experience of taking my therapy dog to a local animal hospital. My dog was undergoing many tests due to the mystery surrounding constant weight loss. He was not doing well. One morning we had to take him in unexpectedly as he was hardly moving. They weighed him on the scales and quickly escorted the three of us into the nearest examination room.

Sitting with deep fear in our hearts we gently stroked the fur of our handsome big boy waiting for the doctor to enter. The door to our room was left ajar. While we sat in dread of the not knowing the fate of our beautiful pet, another vet walked by. Stuffed under one of her arms was a limp but alive small dog and as



*In the depths
of grief
Far beyond
the place
of tears
Memories
reside*

she walked by our open room she irritatingly exclaimed, "I have another euthanization and need someone to help me in the back." Upon witnessing this event, both of our hearts filled with terror at the thought of our community therapy dog receiving the same death sentence on that cold morning. How insensitive and careless in not thinking about others in the nearby rooms. Needless to say we never went back to that clinic again. Thank goodness our sensitivity has grown exponentially over the past decade. We want dignity for our pets facing end of life challenges.

Many veterinarians now include a quiet room where patients may wait the outcome of their injured or sick pet's future. One clinic here in the city designed its new quarters to incorporate a quiet room for animals facing end of life. There are two doors so you need not go through the waiting room once you check in and are ready to see the doctor. This fosters dignity and displays sensitivity to meeting the needs of the pets and their guardians. You are invited to take your pet's favourite toy and blanket to make your animal companion as comfortable as possible. Being in a home-like room is calming when you are already in distress. I have been blessed to experience this with two of my ani-

mal companions and having a quiet room was extremely helpful.

And some veterinarians make house calls in order that the pet is as comfortable as possible. Also, this allows the entire family to be involved and creates a ceremonial area right in their home. This also facilitates children or other pets being able to witness the pet's end of life if they wish. There are many ways to create rituals and ceremony to commemorate your pet depending on the circumstances.

Having these options available allows you to be aware of the many avenues to explore prior to an emergency. This knowledge will surely mitigate some of the anxiety when faced with emergencies and end of life situations with your beloved animal. We all can contribute and carry this sentient wisdom in assisting those experiencing the loss of a partnership that fosters happiness and loving kindness. Our animal companions deserve this dignity. 🐾

— *Straja Linder King is a board-certified clinical art therapist and clinical animal-assisted art therapist. She practices at her Strawberry Moon studio with certified therapy dogs, Twillow Rose and Tala Rain. Visit www.strawberrymoon-counselling.com for more info.*