



Natural Transitions

Volume 7 Issue 1

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life



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Saying Goodbye to Our Pets

by Ella Bittel

My pager went off within minutes of my arrival at a New Year's Eve party after a three-hour drive to Los Angeles. This could hardly be good news. The caller's number belonged to the lovely couple who had taken my two dogs in with theirs for this special night. I scrambled to find a place away from the music and the voices to call them back.

After returning from their New Year's dinner, the couple had found my little 17-year-old mutt, Plouche, with completely changed eyes and unable to stand. They had told me ahead of time they were going to attend this event in the early evening. I didn't see any problem with that since, even if some early fireworks were going to happen, Plouche had lost enough of his hearing that this would not concern him, a grace aging had brought.

They were ready to bring Plouche to the closest veterinary clinic, a 45-minute drive from their home. I gave some instructions on how they could support him on the way there. Immediately getting into my car, I knew I would not reach the clinic ahead of them. As the miles raced by in that dark night, so did the thoughts in my mind.

How could this happen from one moment to another? Plouche appeared completely normal when I dropped him off only hours before. What was he feeling in this moment? He must be so scared, and I wasn't there with him.

Sixteen years earlier I had adopted Plouche as a one-year-old from a shelter. He had separation anxiety, and the only way I could go anywhere without him was because I had another dog, Momo. But Momo couldn't help Plouche now. I begged the universe: "Please, let me be with him, please let me be by his side before he dies if that is what's happening."

When I arrived at the clinic, my woman friend was sitting quietly in the otherwise empty waiting room, holding Plouche in her arms. "He died within minutes of us getting here," she said softly. "He was so very close the vet said nothing needed to be done."

Momo, Plouche and I made it back home. We were alone with time to let the event sink in. I was in a daze, my actions instinctual. The right place to lay Plouche's little body down was the one he would have chosen himself if he were still alive—on my bed. The friend who had invited me to the party encouraged me by phone to take time to sit with him, to perhaps paint his picture, write and read him a letter, and to take photographs. I did all of that. There really was nothing else to do. Plouche's body looked so natural, as if he were sleeping. Momo joined Plouche on the bed, and I watched him for hours, inevitably seeing him "breathe," or what seemed a slight movement mimicking respiration commonly perceived by those who watch closely over a body at death.

I was grateful that the next day was a holiday so the local vet's office wasn't open to receive the body. For once, the inadequate heating system in my cottage worked in our favor. Plouche's body held up well in the cooler temperature. There was no odor or bloating, just a very still Plouche. We could just spend this quiet time together. I figured I'd take him to the vet hospital the next day.

Another night passed, January 2nd arrived and it repeatedly crossed my mind that I could now take Plouche's body to the hospital's freezer. As a veterinarian I knew all about that freezer, and I had no problem with storing Plouche's body there temporarily, nor had I intentions of burying him.

So what kept me from going? I simply could not bring myself to take the action. I wondered whether I was crossing a threshold to insanity, yet I felt calm. I decided to keep the experience private, so as not to scare any clients away. After all, I could not explain why I was keeping my dog's body so long. It's just what unfolded; why apply any outside standards to my very own experience of being with the sudden death of my companion of many years?

Seventeen years, what more could I expect? That was a wonderfully long life for a dog. There wasn't anything fundamentally wrong about his passing other than not being by his side when it happened; I wished I'd had a bit of notice. He had been trucking along just fine, and then he was gone. I felt shocked, guilty and sad that I had not been with him in his last hours. Also, Momo had never known life without Plouche.

Plouche was with me throughout my years of veterinary school in Belgium. As a youngster, he almost died from a dog bite into his lungs. He lived through my years at a university in Berlin, and then in Hanover. We lived in a camper van together for years, first in Germany, then in the United States. Plouche was my loyal companion for longer than any boyfriend.

Was there anything wrong with treating myself gently during this loss, allowing myself to process Plouche's departure after such a long time together? Momo went right along with it all. The third night was our last as a threesome. The next day, the time felt right to take that beloved little body away.

I called my mom in Germany to share what had happened. She had known Plouche as my steadfast sidekick. I told her how curious it felt to not want to move his body for three days. My mom's response was completely unanticipated.

“Yes, that’s what we did in our family in East Germany too. Whenever someone died, we would trade off sitting with the body for three nights.” Really? Here I was, about a third of a century old, and she had never mentioned this before. Did I somehow tap into a family tradition without knowing? “Why did you do that?” I asked. Having been a nurse, she responded that partially it was done to make sure the person had really died before burying them; in those days there must have been a few times when doubt remained about that. But sitting with the deceased was also a treasured time for family to gather and reminisce over cups of tea.

When I talked with a friend in the US, he too recalled a tradition in his family of staying with a body for three nights and days. My curiosity was piqued, surpassing my concerns about how clients might react to keeping Plouche’s body that long. It turned out quite a few people from diverse cultural backgrounds knew of this tradition in past generations. I was baffled and increasingly intrigued by the fact that, mostly, vigils were held for the same time frame: three days and nights.

Stumbling upon Sogyal Rinpoche’s *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, I found his discussion of the dying process as a two-part endeavor: first the outer dissolution—when the senses and elements facilitating bodily function dissolve—followed by inner dissolution of the gross and subtle thought states and emotions. In our society we declare an individual dead when the outer dissolution is complete and the heart has stopped beating. Tibetan wisdom suggests, however, that death is complete only after the individual has journeyed through the subtle levels of consciousness, which generally takes up to three days. There it was again: that magical time frame of three days after the death of the physical body.

I wondered whether the Tibetan teachings were more than metaphorical.



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Did I instinctively perceive that Plouche was still present in some way? Now I was hoping to find further confirmation of the process after physical death, and I did. While attending an event, “Conference for Science and Consciousness,” I encountered a fascinating presenter from Russia by the name of Konstantin Korotkov. This professor of research, computer science and biophysics at St. Petersburg University has developed a sophisticated device that allows for direct, real-time viewing of the human energy fields. Via a special camera, this technology captures and displays the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual energy of individuals. Let that sink in for just a moment.

The possible medical implications are mind-boggling. But what nearly tipped me off the edge of my seat was hearing that Korotkov had not stopped at evaluating people who were alive. He

wrote an entire book, *Light after Life*, about what he found when doing measurements on bodies of people who had recently passed. Here are some of his conclusions:

≈ Energy flows in a (recently) dead body are as active as in an alive person. Even for the best-trained professional, it is not possible to tell from the measurements whether the person is dead or alive!

≈ There are significant processes going on after what is clinically considered death.

≈ Those processes in a human usually last over a period of 2 to 3 days.

Indeed, energy activity can be measured for as long as the Tibetans keep their dead. It took science thousands of years to catch up with what was readily apparent to those with skillful meditation as their sole technology; even the now-quantifiable evidence is far from widely known.

As a holistic veterinarian, the success of my work is founded on my understanding of the strong analogies between human and animal energetic anatomy. It’s no stretch to deduce that a dying dog may undergo a similar process to a human after its heart stops. There is no question for any dog lover that their four-legged companion has emotions. Plouche had plenty of them, dominating daily life decisions for 16 years, due to his separation anxiety. There certainly were enough feelings for him to fuel an inner dissolution process.


Those who have experienced it know that the tender act of holding a vigil for the recently deceased gives space to process emotions and brings comfort and peace of heart. This special time not only provides a healing space for the bereaved but also for those who have passed to complete their important process surrounded by those who love them most.

Maybe that is why it's called a "wake." The dead aren't dead and we too who are watching over them are beckoned into a state of heightened awareness. Since Plouche's death, I have shared our experience together with many people. Friends, clients and students have adopted this option of a vigil when a beloved animal has transitioned. Some have shared their unique experiences with me. But only those who know of it in advance of a death tend to do it. For those whose loved one's have left unexpectedly, the experience of waiting before relinquishing the body has been priceless.

If we elect to keep the body for some time after the heart stops, it doesn't mean we have to spend 72 hours in rapt suspense. There is time to rest, sit in candlelight and listen to music, to reminisce with those who shared our love, to read what feels relevant and also to do ordinary things that keep our lives going. While I stepped into my encounter of a vigil unprepared, I have



since compiled some helpful basics about keeping a beloved pet's body for a vigil.

I don't know what happens with bodies that are taken away without a vigil. All I know is that, for me, it was a most natural desire to remain close to my dog's body, to ensure it was undisturbed and surrounded by love until the process of death was complete. 

Holistic veterinarian Ella Bittel became a passionate ambassador of hospice care for companion animals through her experiences with the end-of-life of first her own and then her clients' four-legged family members. For over a decade now, her website spiritsintransition.org has offered a free, non-veterinary helpline for those whose animal loved-ones are facing terminal illness.

In her online classes, Bittel shares in-depth about care options when aiming for a natural, hospice-supported death of an animal friend, based on this insight: The time to prepare is when your animal is still well.

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