

My recent experience with Pet Loss:

IN MEMORY OF NOODLES 5/25/92 – 5/12/06

Noodles was my female black lab mix, whom I often called “The Divine Miss N.” She was a remarkably loving, responsive, sensitive dog who served as my co-therapist for many years. She was like my child and a constant companion. In the weeks before she died I spoke to her often about who she was to me, and how much I loved her and appreciated having her for nearly fourteen years. I told her she was the love of my life. One day I said it was my privilege to have known her. She had made such a difference in her lovingness to people. Her tail moved up and down. She got it.

And then there was the moment of truth. Noodles lost her ability to walk on the flats of her feet. Because of a neurological mis – connection, she was trying to walk on curled toes and couldn’t. She had lost her appetite completely, and was now being fed mashed food through a tube that looked like a cake decorator. Her eyes were cloudy. She often panted. The last straw was that she smelled like a dead animal; her mouth had a rancid smell from some kind of infection.

I always prayed she’d have a natural death. I never wanted to be responsible for euthanasia, though I strongly believe in it. The morning after I smelled that disgusting smell in my beloved dog’s mouth, I woke up knowing, whether I wanted to or not, I had to put Noodles to sleep now. Our Vet came to our house a few hours later. Noodles was lying asleep on her quilt in the guest room, where she had begun sleeping some months before. (I hated and never understood why she stopped sleeping on a quilt on the floor next to me in our bedroom.) My sister-in –Law, Lynn, sat on the bed above Noodles, and I lay

next to her on the floor holding her head in my arms. (My husband chose not to be present, which I understood.)

The Vet quietly shaved her arm to look for a vein. We talked about how her veins had always been hard to find. He gave her the shot, and her head fell back a little in my arms. Her whole body softened and relaxed. Only then did I realize how tense she must have been. Her beautiful rich brown eyes were open after she died. I liked that. Lynn didn't. The Vet said it takes muscle control to close eyes.

I couldn't get over that Noodles looked quite beautiful dead. She looked more beautiful dead than alive, as alive she looked fragile, shaky, skinny and matted. I always feared that my dog would look like the horrifying sight of animals we see on the side of the road—raccoons or squirrels lying on their backs with claws in the air and mouths open as if to scream. She didn't look anything like that. She looked as if she'd fallen asleep with her eyes open. Her fur looked soft again. She was at peace.

After we had talked quietly about Noodles, saying how wonderful a dog she was, the Vet got ready to wrap her in her quilt and carry her to his car. The vet commented that she was one of the loveliest animals he had ever known. And she was. He carried Noodles outside and put her in the back of his SUV. She was to be cremated. I did not keep her ashes. She lives in my heart forever.

Several days later I missed Noodles so much, I forced myself to put into words what I felt. Over and over I said aloud, “I miss you so much. I can’t bear it.” I cried much of that day. But the next day, to my surprise I didn’t feel like crying. I had honored one of the suggestions I give clients and readers for dealing with grief, and it worked. I owned my feelings instead of pretending or denying. I expressed my feelings thoroughly – as uncomfortable as these feelings were. It is true: Feelings expressed do disappear.

I soon recognized that I was beginning to bear the unbearable. In the next weeks I wrote, I still miss Noodles often during the day, but I don’t feel pain every time I think of her. I enjoy her photographs now. Sometimes I can remember her and tell anecdotes about her with joy. My sense of loss is still present. I’m aware of her absence – sometimes many times a days but noticing is no longer unbearable.

I tell my story to make the point that feelings at first may feel unbearable. But, if allowed and acknowledged, they begin to change -- sometimes ever so slightly, sometimes dramatically. The unbearable can become bearable. Moreover, as we face our truth instead of denying it, we begin to develop more resilience. Expressing our feelings enables us to find within us more courage to face the loss in our lives.

In contrast, avoiding our feelings, pressing them down under the surface or running away from them, they haunt us, disturb us, and keep us in a state of suffering. Feelings denied just don’t go away, no matter how much we wish they would simply evaporate.

I am convinced that it is in acknowledging how hard our grief is to bear that we begin the process of tolerating it. And ultimately, this is how we heal. Soon I found myself longing to have a dog again, longing for the love and companionship that only a beloved pet can give. Several months after Noodles

died I adopted two year old Honey, a yellow lab mix. Honey's unfailingly love has been the final step in helping me heal from the loss of Noodles. I still think of Noodles often but most times it is with joy not with pain. I have no regrets.

I write this to remind us that we each have within us the capability to face terrible circumstances, painful loss, great sorrow. Yet, most of us cannot believe that we could possibly have the courage. We just don't trust ourselves to face and live through these experiences, let alone to eventually heal. Yet it is in allowing our feelings that we demonstrate the courage it takes to heal from grief.