

Good Grief

He was the best dog I ever had.

It was so sudden when he got sick and died. He was always by my side and then suddenly he was gone forever. The stillness of my house echoed the ache in my heart.

There is great truth in Roger Caras' famous quote, "Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our life whole." When we lose one, something wonderful and fulfilling is taken from us.

Compared to so many animals, dogs live such a relatively short time. Every time that I've lost a dog the unfairness of their brief stay with us crosses my mind. How unfair it is that such wonderful creatures are gone so quickly. We all know that losing them is an eventuality that we will face. Knowing it doesn't make it any easier; it's just the realization of the human-canine situation.

A couple of years ago, I was sitting in the spectator bleachers at an Agility trial and overheard a conversation between a husband and wife who were sitting nearby. It was a very serious, on the verge of tears conversation. She was talking about getting another dog. After a prolonged period of eavesdropping, I realized that she had lost her old dog and was finally ready to get another. Her husband was not so convinced that it was a good idea. After making a logical, fact filled discussion of their loss, the exasperated husband finally said, "Why do you want to put yourself through it again?" Without missing a beat she said, 'I have grieved, there will never be another like him, but having a dog completes our lives.'

Being a "dog person" and not having a dog, does make you feel incomplete. Most of us have been in that situation at some time in our lives due to circumstances beyond our control. Whether the reason is school, work, family situations or having your dog die, there's a hollowness and deep desire to make things better by sharing your life with a dog.

When we experience the death of our dog, allowing a period of grief gives closure and helps us prepare for what is to come. Grieving can take many forms. Some people have to rush out and quickly get a new dog. The new life helps to heal hearts and minds. The joy of a new puppy eases the loss. For other people, there's a need for a longer period of grieving. How long you grieve and have a dogless household is a very personal choice. There's no right or wrong way to do it. When it's time to bring that new bundle of canine energy into your life, you will know.

Good grief allows us to honor the memory of those who we have lost. Once the shock of the loss is behind us and we accept the reality, we can move on. Moving on does not mean forgetting. Rather it means putting special memories in our hearts and minds so we can call them up at will and for a moment once again remember and honor our lost friend.

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