The Loss of Animal Companions: 
A Humanistic and Consumption Perspective

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This research project examines the dispossession of animal companions by loving owners. The results of two data collections reveal six highly interrelated themes: Love and Friendship, Joy in Life versus Sorrow in Death, Pets as Family Members, Vividness of Unexpected Death, Goodbye Rituals, and Return to Nature. The article closes with a brief discussion of the implications of these themes for service providers and for the education of potential pet owners.

My dog does have his failings, of course. He’s afraid of firecrackers and hides in the clothes closet whenever we run the vacuum cleaner, but unlike me he’s not afraid of what other people think of him or anxious about his public image. He barks at the mail carrier and the newsboy, but in contrast to some people I know he never growls at the children or barks at his wife.
(Kowalski, 1991, p. 2)

Pet ownership in the U.S. is higher than ever; more than 60 percent of homes contain animal companions ranging from dogs and cats to birds, fish, and myriad other non-human species (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992). Consumers spent $8.5 billion annually on pet food (Mogelonsky, 1995), and more than $5 billion a year on veterinary services (Crispell, 1991). And according to the International Association of Pet Cemeteries, many people are willing to invest in their pets in death as in life; there are more than 600 pet cemeteries across the nation, and new ones are established almost monthly (Drown, 1995). On the other hand, 11 to 27 million cats and dogs pass through the 5,000 or so animal shelters in the U.S. each year. Nearly half of these animals are given up by their owners; the rest are strays. And only about 1 in 5 cats or dogs in shelters is adopted (Crispell, 1991).
Psychologists and sociologists have shown moderate interest in examining the nature of the human-animal bond (e.g., Katcher & Beck, 1983; Loyer-Carlson, 1992; Sussman, 1985; Tuan, 1984), but consumer researchers have, until recently, had little to say about the diverse relationships between consumers and their pets (for exceptions, see Hirschman, 1994; Sanders, 1990). This study seeks to extend our understanding of these relationships by focusing on owners’ experiences of and responses to a pet’s death. Current knowledge of animals’ roles in our lives will be discussed, with a focus on humans’ responses to the loss of a pet. Then our study will be presented, followed by a brief discussion of implications for service providers and consumer education.

The Functions of Pets in Our Lives

Hirschman (1994) enumerates the diverse roles pets may play in our lives; most fundamentally, they are viewed and treated either as objects/property or as companions with feelings and preferences of their own. Object animals may serve as ornaments (e.g., exotic fish or birds acquired for their beauty), as status symbols (e.g., thoroughbred horses), or as equipment (hunting dogs, carriage horses). Companion animals may be regarded as friends, family members, or even as extensions or part of the consumer’s self. Intuition and anecdotal evidence would suggest that many pets have dual functions as objects and as companions. For example, the senior author knows a couple who adopted a doberman for protection. Because she has been treated humanely from puppyhood, she is very affectionate. It appears that she functions as a child as well as a guard dog: she has regularly scheduled “play time” with her favorite dog friend and she owns many toys. But she has been trained to attack (human and canine) intruders, and will do so if her home or her owners are threatened.

When asked how they view their pets, between 70 (Beck & Katcher, 1983) and 93 percent (Katcher & Rosenberg, 1979) of respondents report that they view them as family members. When a pet is regarded as a close friend or family member, one cannot assume it is merely a substitute for a human (Weisman, 1991). As the opening quote suggests, animals provide us with love and acceptance that is not contingent on our appearance, social or economic status, or accomplishments. They do not criticize or mock us, and they never become entangled in our own ruminations and abstractions. In contrast to human relationships, which may be complex, confusing, and at times painful, bonds with pets are unambivalent and relaxed, and (in many instances) more consistently intimate and loving. And pets need us to care for them on a daily basis; unlike human children, who eventually grow up and become independent, or spouses, who can fend for themselves, pets
are totally dependent on us for their survival and well-being. Thus they fulfill our need to be needed, to nurture and to love. Given that pets offer us so much, it is not surprising that an individual who has lost a beloved animal companion may grieve as for a human companion.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that all pets are so treasured or their loss so mourned. Research (Hirschman, 1994) as well as anecdotal evidence (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992) suggests that pets are regarded as family members or close friends to the degree that they may be anthropomorphized, i.e., imbued with human motives, feelings, and thoughts. Hirschman proposes that pets are arrayed within a cultural hierarchy, the lowest rung of which is occupied by cold-blooded vertebrates (the most difficult to anthropomorphize), and the highest rung by dogs and cats (the most readily humanized). Birds and rodents occupy the middle rungs. In interviews with pet owners, Hirschman found that “animals at the lower end were more likely to be objectified and commoditized – viewed as food for self or others, discarded down a toilet or in a garbage can” (p. 625).

Responses to the Death of an Animal Companion

More than 15 million animals kept as pets die each year (Katcher & Beck, 1983). At least two and a half million are euthanized by veterinarians with the owner’s consent (Fogle, 1981; Katcher & Beck, 1983; McCulloch & Bustad, 1983). According to more recent reports, veterinarians perform an average of 8 to 11 euthanasias per month (Hart, Hart, & Mader, 1990; Sanders, 1995). Disease, accidental injuries, natural causes, and human neglect or abuse account for unknown proportions of the 12 and a half million or so remaining deaths.

How an individual responds to the death of an animal companion is a function of myriad factors, including degree of attachment (Gage & Holcomb, 1991; Harris, 1983; Sanders, 1995), previous bereavement experiences, age, attitudes of others (Stewart, 1983), and childhood socialization regarding “appropriate” responses to death (Dickinson, 1992). Because the death of an animal companion may be experienced very differently by children and adults, we discuss the two groups separately.

Children’s Responses to the Death of an Animal Companion

While a number of researchers have attempted to examine how children acquire the concept of death (see Lazar & Torney-Purta, 1993 for a review), few have focused on childhood bereavement experiences involving animals in particular (Dickinson, 1992). Stewart (1983) asked 135 school children aged 6 to 15 years to write essays...
about their animal companions, indicating what they liked about the animal and how they felt when it died. Of the 62 children who wrote about animals that had died, two-thirds reported that they felt sad. In all bereavements that appeared unresolved, the child’s parents were unwilling to have another animal, usually because they did not wish to experience another loss. This conflict between the wishes of child and parents often led to family arguments.

Stewart observes that parents and veterinarians may have great influence on children’s subsequent attitudes toward, and responses to, animal companions’ deaths:

The father who went to the trouble to bury his daughter’s fish created a very different impression on that child than the vet who laughingly made a comment about ‘fish for dinner’ when a daughter’s friend brought in a dying goldfish. (That girl never again took an animal to a vet.) (Stewart, 1983, p. 394)

Dickinson (1992) collected retrospective written accounts of 440 college students’ first experiences with death; 28 percent of those childhood experiences involved the death of an animal. Commonly reported emotions included sadness, confusion, fear, and guilt. Most respondents recalled crying. When an animal companion died in an accident, almost without exception, respondents reported feeling intense anger, even hatred, directed at the one who had killed the animal. This anger extended to parents who had the animal companion put to sleep, and to the vet who performed the euthanasia.

Whether the child’s bereavement involved the loss of an animal or of a human, parental responses were often inadequate or inappropriate. Several respondents described being punished for crying. One respondent was spanked with a hairbrush when she was 15 years old for crying over the death of her puppy. In another account, the parents of a four-year-old girl did not tell her that her puppy had been killed by a mowing machine until two or three weeks after the event. “She was allowed to search for him ‘frantically’ every day. She even put out food and would worry at night that he was cold or hungry” (p. 174).

Young children often believe that they can control, and thus are responsible for, what happens to those around them, humans and animals alike (Fraiberg, 1959; Leach, 1983). Such “magic thinking” brings with it wholly unwarranted but overwhelming feelings of guilt when something goes wrong:

One four year-old girl’s responsibility was to feed the dog, Charlie, every night. One night she forgot to feed Charlie, and the next day Charlie did not
come home. She said: 'I just knew he had run away because I had not fed him. I felt terribly guilty, but I kept my mouth shut and did not tell my parents of my grave mistake. A few days passed, and Charlie still did not come back, even though every night I tried to call him to feed him...My parents finally told me that Charlie would never be coming back because he had been run over. Well, this information devastated me. I put all the blame on myself. I just knew that Charlie had been run over because I had failed to feed him that night. (Dickinson, 1992, p. 172)

Relatively few of the entire group of 440 respondents recounted memories of family closeness and sharing of grief. This culture’s extreme discomfort with death is well-documented (Gentry, Kennedy, Paul & Hill, 1994; Leach, 1983); Dickinson’s study suggests mechanisms by which children are taught this discomfort, and the concomitant denial and/or repression of grief at the loss of beloved humans or animals.

**Adults’ Responses to the Death of an Animal Companion**

Adults’ initial responses to the death of an animal companion may include sadness and crying (Cowles, 1985; Harris, 1983; Stewart, 1983; Weisman, 1991), appetite and sleep disturbances (Quackenbush, 1984), a temporary inability to cope with daily routine (Cowles, 1985; Quackenbush, 1984; Stewart, 1983), and often guilt when the owner consented to have the animal euthanized (Harris, 1984). If the animal companion died in an accident, cognitive reliving of the event is common (Cowles, 1985). Searching behavior (unconscious attempts to locate the animal) and misperceptions of the animal’s presence are not uncommon in the weeks and months following the death. The animal’s possessions - collars, favorite toys, food dishes, blankets - are often kept as mementos (Cowles, 1985). The time it takes to recover from the loss may vary from a few days to many months (Katcher & Rosenberg, 1979; Stewart, 1983; Weisman, 1991).

The death of an animal companion may also lead to disruptions in family functioning. In a survey of 242 couples who reported the death of an animal companion in the prior 3-year period, Gage and Holcomb (1991) found that 40 percent of the wives and more than 25 percent of the husbands stated that they were “quite” or “extremely” disturbed by the loss. For husbands, the loss of an animal companion was almost as stressful as the loss of a close friendship, and more stressful than children leaving home or getting married. For wives, an animal companion’s death was about as stressful as losing touch with their married
children, and more stressful than the loss of a close friendship or children leaving home or getting married. Researchers have observed that in cases where family members' reactions to the death are quite disparate, the member who is most deeply affected may be rejected or stigmatized by the others (Carmack, 1985; Gage & Holcomb, 1991).

While some individuals may attempt to talk with someone about an animal companion's death (Cowles, 1985), few report being comforted by such interactions (Cowles, 1985; Stewart, 1983). In Cowles' study, for example, one informant "bitterly reported that when she appeared upset at work the day following her dog's death, her boss responded by saying, 'Well, it's just a dumb dog'" (p. 141). Weisman (1991), in his counseling of the bereaved, notes:

> the discovery of acceptance and respect for their bereavement was in itself appreciated. There was a general reluctance to tell others about their bereavement, because they feared criticism, condescension, or curt suggestions, such as, 'Get another cat,' 'After all, it's only a dog.'...Most people apologized for crying. (p. 243)

It is clear that the seeds sown in childhood have taken root.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to better understand the bereavement process for an animal companion from a consumer behavior perspective, data were collected from two independent sources. The first source was a pet cemetery located in the same community as the pet owners. The second source was current or former pet owners who had experienced loss of one or more pets previously.

Data collection occurred at a community pet cemetery that was one of two pet-only public burial grounds locally. According to the proprietors, the pet owners who use this facility vary demographically but share a deep and abiding relationship with their pets. Most of these individuals chose to bury their animal companions instead of other means of dispossession in order to establish a lasting memorial to an esteemed family member.

All of the information contained on the approximately 100 "active" grave sites/memorials were recorded, including the pet's name, birth and death dates, and epitaph. Consistent with the method described previously, these data were examined to gain an understanding of the pet/owner relationship. Several themes emerged that inform the data collected from the second source.
The 73 current or former pet owners were asked to compose a lengthy essay describing their relationships with their deceased pets from its inception to final dispossession. Consistent with the recommendations of Wertz (1983), the researchers employed the five components of everyday description out of which insights and the ultimate interpretation should emerge. All were used to guide this analysis, and they include: undertaking an empathic immersion in the world of description; slowing down and dwelling on the details of the description; magnifying and amplifying the situation to understand its significance; suspending belief by taking a step back and wondering what this particular way of living the situation is all about; and turning from objects or events to the meanings they hold for informants.

These recommendations were operationalized by working through four successive stages. The first stage required reliving the experience of each respondent by reading his or her essay until the researchers felt a sense of “empathic knowing” of the pet owner as an individual who experienced a cherished relationship with an animal companion. The second stage required the summarization of each pet owner’s dispossession experience. After these two steps were accomplished for all respondents, the third stage began which involved searching for common themes. The fourth stage required that interconnections among the themes be explored in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the pet dispossession experience. To this end, each essay was reviewed again in an attempt to validate these themes as well as to look for negative and qualifying evidence that failed to support this gestalt.

**Thematic Interpretation**

**Pet Cemetery**

Our analysis of the pet cemetery revealed three highly interrelated themes: Love and Friendship, Joy in Life versus Sorrow in Death, and Pets as Family Members. Each is briefly discussed below.

The theme of Love and Friendship was articulated clearly in the sentiments contained on the grave markings/stones. Many owners simply stated “To Our Beloved [Name]/Friend” or “We love you.” Others added that their animal companions were their “best friend” or “loyal friend.” While none of this is necessarily surprising given the closeness of some owner/pet relationships, the true depths of these friendships were revealed in the epitaphs that extended these feelings into the unlimited future (“We love you Now & Forever”/“Love Always”)
or until the owner and pet are reunited in death ("My love until we meet again"/
"If there is an eternity may we share it together"). Thus, this theme reveals
the close personal relationship between owners and animal companions
and its enduring quality.

The Joy-in-Life versus Sorrow-in-Death theme presents the contrast for
owners between life before and after the death of a beloved pet. For example,
animal companions were described as "The joy of our lives" by virtue of their ordinary yet
loyal traits and behaviors ("Such a sweet heart always sitting pretty"). On the other
hand, the loss of these cherished relationships was deeply felt ("Sadly Missed"),
resulting in personal reflection about the past and future ("You came to me from
nowhere, now only memories"). Thus, this theme demonstrates the integral nature
of the relationship between owners and their animal companions.

Pets-as-Family-Members also was widespread. Animal companions often were referred to as “son,” “daughter,” or “baby,” and owners referred to themselves as “mommy” or “daddy.” Also, some of the pets were afforded special status, and their grave stones noted that they were “adopted” by the family or represented the family’s “only child.” This theme typically was associated with one or the other of the previously discussed themes. For example, love and family were common (“You bring us the greatest love – Papa-Mamma”) as well as feelings of sorrow and family (“Your broken-hearted Mommy”). Thus, this theme uncovers the sacred status that some animal companions achieve if they attain the position of an esteemed family member.
Our analysis of the essays revealed the three themes described above, as well as three additional themes: Vividness of Unexpected Death, Good-bye Rituals, and Return to Nature.

Pets as Family Members; Love and Friendship

Because these two themes are so closely interrelated in the essays, they will be illustrated and discussed together. The Pets as Family Members theme was manifest in the vast majority of essays. Several writers expressed the belief that they had a special, uniquely intense bond with the family pet:

Rocky [a black lab/Doberman mix] grew up with me and saw me off to college. There was never a time I wasn’t with him. He would ride in the front seat of my truck no matter where I went. When I would go home [from college] for breaks, I would look forward to seeing him as much as my parents. He was friendly to everyone and loved to swim. Although he could easily be an outdoor dog, we kept him in the house. He truly was part of our family. I am an only child, and to me, he was like a brother.

Cuddles [a dwarf bunny] had tan fur and was only as big as the palm of your hand...Every day after school I would come home and pet him. Both my mom and my grandfather (who lived with us) would also talk to and play with him. My grandfather would also pick fresh grass for him and get cabbage for him from the market. I would play music for him and talked to him about things like he could understand me...I would give him four pieces of Life cereal every night with his dinner. Cuddles would always get excited, spin in circles, and eat the Life first...My brother liked him but would be mean to him to get me mad...The things I will remember most about Cuddles is how soft the fur on the back of his neck was, and how he would lick my hands but bite my brother’s.

Casey [a Golden Retriever puppy] soon became a loved member of the family. She seemed to get more attention than any other member! I enjoyed the time I spent with Casey immensely. I was the one who trained her so we spent many hours alone together. Sometimes I trained her but often we just played. To me it seemed that a special bond developed between us that she did not share with the rest of my family.
Rocky was an animal brother, as described in Hirschman (1994). Unlike a human sibling, who would eventually go his own way, Rocky remained at home, ever eager to spend time with his childhood companion. No two humans, however intimate and loving, can travel precisely the same path in life, but our animal companions will go with us anywhere. It is not surprising, then, that we honor and pamper our pets, as Cuddles was honored and pampered.

Judging from the essays, anecdotes, and the authors' own experiences with pets, two of the primary ways in which we honor them are by anthropomorphizing them and by offering them gifts; Cuddles was fed human food, and Rocky was given Christmas presents (wrapped), including a personalized water bowl and a bed which was set directly beside his master's. Nowhere is the process of honoring through anthropomorphization more eloquently illustrated than in the following passage about Tootsie, a parakeet who, the writer explains:

became the light of my family's and my life. There were many reasons why I liked Tootsie so much, but it was mainly because she started to become a human being to us. It started one morning when I was eating my Rice Krispies before school, and Tootsie jumped on my bowl to share my breakfast. From that morning on, Tootsie received her own bowl of cereal every morning. She also experienced loneliness just as a human would. If we would leave her alone without any type of noise in the house, we would come home to find her waiting for someone at the front window. This is when we started to leave the radio on for her if we went out, which made her feel as though there were people somewhere in the house.

The writer goes on to describe how, every Christmas, each member of the family gave Tootsie a different toy. Perhaps because the essays were written in early December, they contain numerous accounts of the inclusion of the family pet in Christmas celebrations; many animals were given presents, often in their own personalized Christmas stockings.

When a pet becomes a family member, s/he may assume a special status not held by any human, by virtue of our perception that animals can love us unconditionally, a feat that does not seem humanly possible. And they can "listen" without judging, gossiping, or offering unwanted advice. Witness Tara and Pepper:

If there is one thing that I will always remember about Tara [a black and white Alaskan Malamute], it would be that she was like a best friend. No
mature how bad a day I could have had, Tara was always happy to see me, and that always gave me the feeling that I was special and that no matter what I did, Tara would always love me.

The things I remember most about Pepper [a dog, the family’s first pet] were the walks we’d take late at night. I’d look at the stars and clear my mind while he’d look at the trees and water them. And ok, I admit it: sometimes when we were out there all alone, I’d talk to him about life or things that were bothering me. He couldn’t talk back but I know he was listening and understood. Those walks used to put me at peace, and I miss them dearly.

The foregoing passages amply illustrate the theme of animal companion as cherished friend. We see this also in people’s descriptions of their bereavement:

I missed him [a dog who died at the age of 15] a lot. It was as if a good friend of mine had died. The house seemed so empty without him. I only spoke with my mother at any real length. She felt very similarly. In fact, she cried more than I did.

[Bear, a 12-year-old golden retriever, had been diagnosed with cancer.] How can you decide to end the life of someone you love so much? I remember talking to Bear and asking him to tell me what he wanted us to do. He just looked up at me from the kitchen floor with his sad old eyes. We all knew what had to happen...

Though euthanasia of companion animals who are suffering and not expected to recover is a widely accepted practice in this society (Fogle, 1981; Hart, Hart & Mader, 1990; McCulloch & Bustad, 1983), it can be a very painful decision for the owner to make (Stewart, 1983), and an emotionally difficult one for the veterinarian to execute (Sanders, 1995). Sanders (1995) suggests that euthanasia becomes problematical when the owner relates to the animal as a subject or person (friend or family member) rather than as an object to be used and discarded at will. Indeed it was Bear’s status as a beloved person that led the owner to look to him for guidance in this heartwrenching decision.

Joy in Life versus Sorrow in Death

The following passages are representative of most of the writers’ descriptions of how they felt upon the death of a companion animal:
For the longest time I was sad that I lost my dog. I never really cried or got too emotional, but I really felt bad. I originally thought that I did not want another dog to replace him. I saw Triever as a part of the family, and you can’t just replace a family member.

I think that I felt the loss of Casey [the golden retriever mentioned earlier] more than the rest of my family because of the bond we shared. My family knew how I felt and I did not think that it was anybody else’s business. I just wanted some time alone to deal with the fact that she was gone and get over it on my own.

Our dog had a bladder disease where he couldn’t control his urination. We were forced to get rid of him. When we got rid of him, I simply laid next to him on the floor and cried for about an hour. I felt as if I had lost a part of myself. We spent a lot of time together. I was the one who took care of him...It took a long time to get over that loss. I didn’t speak to anyone about it. I didn’t feel like anyone would understand.

Each of these excerpts reflects the owner’s intense emotional bond with his/her deceased pet, and correspondingly deep sorrow at the dissolution of that bond. The third passage (representative of many responses we received) is consistent with previous findings that bereaved pet owners are frequently hesitant to reveal their sadness to others for fear that they will respond with impatience or mockery. Our society has little tolerance for the mourning of a lost pet; this, together with other examples of forbidden love and mourning, has been termed Disenfranchised Grief (Doka, 1989). However, as Casey’s owner indicates, some individuals need to mourn in solitude. And of those respondents who did want to share their grief, a few were able to commiserate with other family members, or to confide in understanding friends (usually other pet owners):

One day of my sixth grade year, I came home from school with one of my best friends, John, to find out that one of my other best friends - Joy [the writer’s dog] – had died. I was so upset but afraid to cry in front of John. He comforted me and assured me it was “ok” to cry. “Let it out,” he told me. My mom still remembers him for this sincerity and his support for me in my time of need.

My boyfriend had a major impact on my dealing with the loss of Bear. He had lost his Golden only a few months prior to Bear’s death. I could talk
to him [about] my feelings...I found that talking to a dog owner was the best bet in dealing with the loss of Bear. My friends who didn’t have a dog really didn’t understand my emotional connection to Bear.

**Good-bye Rituals**

When an animal companion was euthanized because of an incurable and degenerative illness (the only reasons cited by these respondents), the entire family often anticipated the impending loss, and said their good-byes in various ways.

As Lindy [the family’s Irish setter] grew older, she became very sick. Her eyes grew worse, and she experienced major arthritis. Lindy became so ill that she was often temporarily paralyzed, and we were forced to carry her around. My parents felt as if our only choice was to put Lindy to sleep since she was experiencing much pain in her old age. This was extremely difficult for my older brother and I to come to terms with, but we knew deep down inside that it was the best thing for her. The night before we brought Lindy to the veterinarian, we did all of Lindy’s favorite things. We made her favorite home-cooked meal, let her snack on an insane amount of dog treats, and finally set her next to a big fire where she would often rest as my family and I watched television.

We were told that Casey had cancer and that she was going to die. My family was devastated. Casey had become so much a part of the family it was impossible to imagine her not being with us. It was not her time. The vet was able to give her some treatment that would limit the effects of the cancer but inside it was still doing damage. We elected to give her the treatment so that we could spend a little more time with her. She was better for a couple weeks but she began to deteriorate quickly. I think that she knew that she was dying because she seemed to want to be with us more than ever. She could not play anymore but she would still lie on the floor with a sad look in her eye. As her situation worsened we had to face reality. It was a very tough decision but we did not want her to suffer so we decided to put her to sleep. On the day it was to occur my father and mother took off from work and we all tried to be with her. Each of us took time to say good-bye in our own way.

The next week, we took Bear to the vet to be put to sleep. The emotional drain that we were all going through was so immense. My brother and
father called out of work. My sisters and I were allowed to miss school that day. It was very traumatic. My dad and brother had to carry Bear to the car...He looked so sick, yet so calm and peaceful at the same time. We arrived at the vet and cried our good-byes to our dear friend, Bear.

On the morning of July 8th, my parents, Pepper and I drove in the family car to Memorial Lake, a small scenic lake 20 minutes out of town. It had always been one of Pepper’s favorite places to go. When we got there, Pepper took a few steps out into the lake just like he always had. After an hour of strolling around, we left for the vet...Pepper always got very nervous around the vet’s office and usually resisted. On this day, he walked calmly through the front door. To this day, I think Pepper knew exactly what was to take place inside. He understood. He accepted. He cooperated.

Lindy and Pepper were given special indulgences on their last day of life, much as prisoners condemned to die may be offered their favorite foods for a last meal. Bear’s family renounced their daily routine in order to be with him during his last moments. While the decision to have an animal euthanized may be a painful one, it does afford the owner an opportunity for a peaceful, loving leave-taking. And many of our respondents appeared to take refuge in the knowledge that they were ending their pet’s suffering, that indeed there was no other humane alternative.

Vividness of Accidental Death

In many cases, there was no opportunity for good-byes. Buck, a black golden setter, was kept chained to a large tree behind the family’s house.

One rainy day, at about 4 o’clock, the thunder was screeching throughout the sky. At this point we were ready to bring Buck indoors. Yet, before we acted, we heard a loud bang that sounded as if lightning struck earth. Because we have many surrounding trees, we initially thought it was one that had been struck and fallen. When we looked outside, we saw Buck lying on the ground, motionless. We refused to believe that Buck was gone, that he would be taken in such a fashion. However, it appeared that the lightning hit the chain, which then proceeded to electrocute Buck.

Our neighborhood was having a yard sale on Saturday, in the spring. I stayed at the house to man our sale table while my father, brother, and Jacques [the family dog] went for a bike ride around the development. They ended up stopping on the side of [the] road. However, a truck driver
who...was more concerned with the yard sales and not the road, went too fast over a blind hill. She hit Jacques leaving him dead at 13 years old. I can remember the commotion that ensued after the incident. I just remember my father picking up Jacques’ body and putting it between blankets in the back of our station wagon. My parents took him to the vet’s for cremation. The whole time, my mother, brother and I were crying. Jacques was part of our family.

Jingles the cat was permitted to roam freely outdoors while the family was away for the evening. We returned home from our party very late that evening. As we pulled up to the driveway, my father noticed a rag laying on the lawn beside the driveway. My father asked my little sister, Tracy, if she could go over and pick up the rag before she went into the house. For some reason I went over with her. Tracy ran over to the rag and picked it up. My parents could hear the screams from inside the garage. They ran out to where we were standing and they could hardly believe their eyes. Lying in the frost covered grass was Jingles. I was hoping that it was just a dream, a joke, or some sickness that was preventing my cat from moving – it could not be death, not Jingles...We went into the house all crying. I particularly remember seeing my father cry and thinking about how special Jingles must have been to cause such a reaction from him. We were later told by our neighbor that Jingles had been hit by a car...It has been 11 years since Jingles’ death, however it only seems like yesterday that my family and I said good-bye to him...

Missy [the family cat] was hit by a car on the road by my house...My brother, who was about 10 at the time, was getting off the bus from school when he saw Missy in the road. The really hard part for my brother was that she was still alive, lifting her head as Derek called her name...My mom went with a friend and brought Missy to the vet, where she died...I remember my brother, mother and I went into an extreme depression...Derek and I went around the house collecting bits of fur and any stray whiskers from the carpets that we could find. Another thing I remember, which I found a few years ago, was a note I had written the day Missy died. It was the writing of a six year-old, and it said something like, “Missy, you died today, I miss you.” Along with the note was the fur and whiskers.

The detail these passages contain suggests that in writing them, the respondents were cognitively (and possibly emotionally) reliving the events. This process
commonly occurs following the accidental death of an animal companion; Cowles (1985) suggests that such rumination may be necessary to establish the reality of the event. It may also reflect the owner’s yearning to turn the clock back and prevent the accident.

Most of the accidents recounted in these essays could have been prevented. A fenced yard would have eliminated the necessity of chaining Buck to keep him from chasing cars, as was his wont (indeed, keeping an animal chained is highly questionable on humane grounds). And many cats (and some dogs as well) are allowed to roam freely, despite the ever-present dangers of traffic. The owners of Buck and Jingles recognized that their untimely deaths could have been prevented. In their struggle to come to terms with the accidents, they imputed special significance to the accidents:

In our minds, Buck’s death occurred for a reason. He saved the monstrous tree, our house that would have been destroyed if the tree fell on it, and our lives as well in the process. His death was an accident that we wished would never have happened. To maintain his memory, we kept his charred chain and made a tiny memorial in the yard, each of us saying good-bye in our hearts...I remember telling my friends about the occurrence and they seemed to react in shock as well. They also said that his death was partly our fault. This I refused to believe, and I shut the idea out from my mind.

The day after Jingles’ death, my parents had brought him to vet early in the morning, before any of us were up. There was no ritual or any special good-byes that we did. I guess that is a little surprising, since Jingles was such a special part of my family and childhood. It did feel like actually losing a member of the family...However, the way my sister rationalized it helped us get through it. She said that God was lonely and needed a pet. He knew the [family] had this great one in Scotch Plains, NJ. Therefore, he brought Jingles to Heaven...

Return to Nature

While many respondents reported that they did not know what became of the deceased animal’s body, others recounted backyard burials:

I buried Cuddles in the backyard and put a big rock at the head of his grave. Flowers grow all over the grave today.
We buried Squirt in the backyard of our house in Lincoln, near the railroad tracks. We planted a plum tree on his grave. We learned from neighbors, several years after we moved away, that the plum tree was a beauty. I wasn’t surprised.

My dad buried Princess in the woods by her house. There is a big rock above where she is buried to mark the grave, and I can remember going to the rock because I missed her.

Two years ago Fluffy died at age 13. My mother found her nestled in the corner of our family room. My mother and sisters were visibly upset...We wrapped Fluffy in a soft towel and we buried her in our backyard under a tree she used to sit under to shade herself from the sun. The spot was marked by a stone, and the stone is still there today.

We had a funeral for Tootsie in the backyard near the fence so she could be with all the birds that always sat there. I wrote her name and the year of her birth and death on the box which we then buried. This way we could go visit with Tootsie at any time.

The first two passages evidence the owners’ beliefs that their beloved animal gave rise to beauty and life even after death. All burials were in a place that was perceived to be a favorite of the animal, a way of honoring and caring for this family member in death as in life. Paradoxically, the absence of a formalized structure for helping people cope with the loss of an animal companion carries with it the freedom to dispose of the remains as one sees fit. Thus it is that the animal — and its spirit — may be kept nearby, and visited readily.

Summary and Discussion

The data collected from the two sources provide parallel findings for consumer researchers and business practice. This research demonstrates the central role that many animal companions play in the lives of their owners, not as objects but as loved and cherished members of families who are a source of joy throughout their lives. The death of these pets, particularly an unexpected or tragic death, results in great sorrow and grief consistent with the loss of a close personal friend, spouse, or child. When possible, some relief is provided through good-bye rituals or burial rites and sites.

Unfortunately, our society does little to prepare pet owners, especially children, for the inevitable loss of animal companions. Grieving is often avoided or
unnecessarily shortened (Gentry et al., 1994), and there are callous individuals who believe that pets are not worthy of an emotional response. While business organizations, in and of themselves, are hardly to blame, they may be able to provide part of the solution. For example, the vast funeral industry in this country designed to support grieving loved ones could be expanded to include, at a minimum, similar rituals and procedures for the dispossession of animal companions that would allow owners to express their sorrow, even if only for a few days. Such a subindustry would go a long way to legitimize what pet owners have always known—that animal companions give and are worthy of lasting love and affection. A few pioneers have already emerged: the Veterinary Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania provides social work services to bereaved pet owners (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983) and pet-loss support hotlines have been established by at least four veterinary schools including Tufts, Michigan State University, the University of Florida, and the University of California at Davis (Catnip, 1996). In addition, the International Association of Pet Cemeteries is working to establish a certification program that would be mandatory for individuals who desire to enter the field of pet cemetery management (Drown, 1995). Such a program would not just focus on business issues, but also on the processes of bereavement and grieving, and on the needs of the bereaved.

Research on parental responses to a child's loss of a pet reveals a pressing need for parent information on how to help their children cope with such losses. This information could be disseminated through veterinarians' offices and animal welfare organizations. Furthermore, the number of preventable accidental deaths described in the essays strongly suggests the need for more widespread and formalized education of consumers regarding the responsibilities entailed by the decision to take an animal into the home. Our animal companions are entirely at our mercy; they depend on us for their survival and well-being. Fox (1990) points out that while myriad studies have demonstrated the benefits to humans of keeping animals, the benefits to the animals themselves have been virtually ignored. He observes that keeping animals as pets:

...entails not only love, but also respect and understanding. Animals should be given equal and fair consideration. They were not created for our own exclusive enjoyment; rather they have interests and a life of their own.

(Fox, 1990, p. 170)

Respecting an animal means being fully informed about the animal's unique needs and wants in the areas of nutrition, exercise, health care, and socialization. It means
protecting animals from human-created dangers – such as automobiles – from which they cannot protect themselves. And it means having the generosity of spirit not to adopt an animal if these needs cannot be met.

To the extent that we can learn to respect and empathize with the animals in our lives, we will be enriched by a broadened perspective of what life on this earth is all about:

So my dog is a sort of guru. When I become too serious and preoccupied, he reminds me of the importance of frolicking and play. When I get too wrapped up in abstractions and ideas, he reminds me of the importance of exercising and caring for my body. On his own canine level, he shows me that it might be possible to live without inner conflicts or neuroses: uncomplicated, genuine, and glad to be alive. (Kowalski, 1991, p. 2)

Notes
1. Stephens is Visiting Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Michigan and Hill is Dean, School of Business Administration, The University of Portland. Correspondence should be directed to Debra Lynn Stephens, University of Michigan Business School, 701 Tappan Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234, (313) 930-9842. We are grateful to those who generously shared with us their experiences of the loss of a cherished animal companion; their accounts touched our souls and gave life and heart to this research.
2. The full account from which this excerpt was taken indicates, not simply momentary insensitivity to a child's grief, but the presence of parental attitudes and behaviors that were pervasive, ongoing, and destructive to the child. Longitudinal research has established that corporal punishment in childhood and adolescence is associated with adulthood depression and suicide, drinking problems, masochistic sex, difficulty attaining a high-level occupation, and violent crime. This link obtains regardless of the age or gender of the child, the frequency of spanking, and whether the parents showed warmth and affection to the child (Straus 1994).

References


