

Saying Goodbye to Angel Animals: Finding Comfort After Losing Your Pet
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INTRODUCTION
Friends at the Rainbow Bridge

Oh! Friend, who gave and comforted, who knew
So overwell the want of heart and mind,
Where may I turn for solace now, or find
Relief from this unceasing loss of you?
— Theodosia Garrison, “The Closed Door”

Bottom line: It hurts like crazy. And hardly anybody understands. Family, friends, coworkers sympathized. For a while. But they expected that you would be over it by now. Maybe they found a day or even a week of grieving to be acceptable. But after all, this was only a pet. Why are you still moping around? Why don't you get another one? Why don't you get a life?

So you ingest their words or their silent disapproval like vials of poison to your self-esteem. You wonder if they could be right. Are you a hopeless, codependent, overly romantic, anthropomorphizing weakling? Why do you mourn the loss of your animal companion more than any other loss in your life? How can this bereavement cause such emptiness, grayness, and sheer torture? You feel foolish. You are embarrassed. You don't want to admit the magnitude, intensity, or tenacity of your pain. You are tempted to suck it in, shove it under, seal it over.

You yearn for a gentle paw to touch your cheek, a sweet chirping to greet each day, an exercise buddy to pad along beside you, or penetrating eyes with childlike innocence to watch your every movement — just one more time.

Despite the lack of understanding from others, you realize that the life and death of your animal companion must not — will not — be forgotten. The brilliant light that illuminated the darkest corners of your life has to be honored. You have lost a way of living as well as a dear friend. And it may be one of the most debilitating losses you have ever experienced.

Besides, you are a person who gives credit where credit is due. You long to acknowledge that an animal companion brought love, joy, comfort, tolerance, respect, balance, companionship, and meaning to your life in ways that are unique, admirable, and worthy of remembering.

Now, you are ready to read this book.

YOUR PARTNERS IN GRIEVING

We are Allen and Linda Anderson, authors of books about the spiritual connection between people and animals. We are a married couple who have been blessed with two human children and many furry family members. Over the twenty-five years of our marriage, we have gone through the losses of Prana, Feisty, Mugsy, Taylor, and Sparkle. We have buried them, scattered their ashes, held memorial services, missed them, and mourned them. We have grieved with our children and each other. We have wondered if the hole that was left when our animal companions died would ever be filled. We have walked through the valley of the shadow of death into the sunlight once again.

In our work with the Angel Animals Network, which we founded in 1996 to increase love and respect for all life through the power of story, we have received thousands of stories from readers who have struggled to find their way out of the maze of sadness that confused them after a pet died. From their experiences and our own, we have fashioned a kind of framework for your grieving and healing. Grief is messy, so we are describing for you the process of organic grieving. It allows you to relax into the knowledge that grief isn't organized. It has its own natural cycles and timetable. As you read through the chapters, empathize with the stories of others, and do the exercises and meditations, your grieving will take on new meaning. You will have the opportunity to transform into a more spiritually self-aware person and, in time, feel happiness again. Our hope is that you will emerge from bereavement as one who looks at life through the clear, bright eyes of love.

YOU HAVE HISTORY

We once did a radio interview during which a caller telephoned the station with a story about a parrot who had recently been left at an animal shelter. The parrot sat at the front desk with staff members and volunteers, who were busily processing adoptions. Throughout the shelter, the bird's voice was heard wailing plaintively, "What went wrong? What went wrong?"

This bird asked an age-old question. Throughout history, human beings have turned to ritual, prayer, and commemoration to deal with their grief when a pet died and to figure out what went wrong. Ancient people's memorial practices helped them to mourn. Egyptians mummified their pets with the same chemicals and in the same ways as they did humans. The grieving family members shaved their eyebrows when a pet died and buried the animal in the family crypt. Persians, as well as people of other ancient cultures, established pet cemeteries for their companion animals. Native Americans shared their dwellings with and welcomed animals into their tribes. They called upon animal spirits during their vision quests.

Like golden threads, animals have always been woven into the tapestry of humans' lives. For many, especially children, the loss of a pet is a first and profound experience with death's mysterious presence. An animal's passing evokes questions about the significance of the animal-human relationship, the afterlife, the soul, and God. Your longing to find answers, explanations, and consolation may bring you to a spiritual turning point. An animal's death can cause you to feel doubt, disbelief, and disconnection. Whirlwinds of anger and denial may compound your grief and cut you off from normal avenues of community and religious solace. When others don't understand that grief for your devoted animal friend is as real and painful as any other kind of grief, you may find yourself feeling even more isolated and alone.

YOU HAVE FRIENDS WHO UNDERSTAND

This book is designed to serve as a friend who knows how you feel, doesn't judge you, and wants to help you allow grief to follow its natural course into acceptance. We have chosen to express the process of grieving, reconciliation, and healing by using symbolic imagery of the legendary Rainbow Bridge. Some truly magnanimous and wise person wrote a story that has since comforted millions of us after our animal companions have died. No one knows who the author is. Yet we all feel grateful for the story's messages of hope.

THE RAINBOW BRIDGE

Just this side of Heaven is a place called the Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies who has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to the Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends, so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food and water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable. All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.

The animals are happy and contented, except for one small thing: they miss someone very special to them who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. The bright eyes are intent; the eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to break away from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster. You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross the Rainbow Bridge together...

RAINBOWS AND BRIDGES

The first three chapters of this book will help you to recognize the primary colors of the Rainbow Bridge. These colors of blue, red, and yellow represent sadness, remembrance, and spiritual growth. Observing and nourishing yourself with the rainbow's colors will allow you to become peaceful. You will begin to understand how the loss of your animal companion has affected your life physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

The next four chapters offer bridges that will transport you through the mourning process. These bridges symbolize a metaphoric range from the practical to the mystical. They are bridges that commemorate and honor the life and death of your pet. Like the Rainbow Bridge, they take you and your animal companion to a place where you can be reunited spiritually. Throughout this book, you will read about the experiences of people who have seen the rainbow's colors and crossed the bridges before you. Their stories offer knowledge, comfort, and wisdom.

HOW THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED

The material in this book runs the gamut; it will be just as useful to those who have a humanist or secular philosophy of life as it will be to those who actively practice a religion or spiritual path. You have the right and the responsibility to decide what and how much you want to take from these pages. Listen to your heart and your inner guidance. Use only what makes you comfortable and helps you to feel better. Discard or disregard the rest.

We have created three types of memorial service that you can use as written, add to, delete from, or mix and match. If the words in these services say what you want to say, by all means read them. If they don't reflect your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, change them in any way that suits you and the guests you invite to your ceremony.

Meditations and questions at the end of each chapter offer prompts for further reflection to help you sort out your thoughts, feelings, and experiences as you go through the grieving process. Additional meditations and exercises are scattered throughout this book so you can immediately reflect and expand upon key points. In the Appendix there are even more meditations that give specific thoughts and suggested activities for more completely healing your grief. We encourage you to use the prompts and meditations for writing about the loss of your animal friend and to start a journal or scrapbook where you can preserve special photographs and mementos.

We use the terms animal companion and pet interchangeably, because in our vocabulary, pet is a term of endearment. We do not use the terms owner or master, because we respect animals as partners and companions of humans in this world. We don't believe that you can own animals. Their love and devotion are freely given, and no price you pay to have them in your life could ever be enough.

We alternate between referring to animals as male or female rather than using only the referent he. And we don't refer to animals with it or that, as if animals were objects instead of sentient beings.

Because you are an individual and your circumstances and views of life are unique, no one can fully comprehend exactly what you are experiencing with the loss of your pet. It is our sincerest hope, though, that as you read these pages, you will find yourself in the company of compassionate listeners and understanding friends.

You, your animal companions, the people who have contributed their thoughts and stories, and we are poised now to journey to the Rainbow Bridge together. Peace and acceptance are on the other side. Happiness and joy in celebrating a life well lived await you.

Hold our hands. We offer them to you in friendship. We will cry with you. We will remember with you. We will honor and commemorate with you.

Let love always be your guide. For unlike the physical bodies we miss so dearly, love never dies.

MEDITATION

How My Life Would Have Been Different

By thinking about how different my life would have been without you, I feel even more gratitude for the gifts

you have given me.

There were times when I would have chosen another course of action or changed directions had it not been for the wise and gentle counsel of your example.

- What role did you play as a divine messenger for me?
- When did you influence my decisions with your gentle ways?
- How did you help me to be a kinder person?