

There's Never A Good Time To Say Goodbye

By Amelia Glynn

When a pet dies, the void they leave behind can feel as devastating as losing a family member.

Betty said goodbye to her 20-and-a-half year old cat Bessie last October. She woke up one morning to discover that Bessie couldn't walk. When the vet examined her beloved cat, he diagnosed Bessie with severe osteoporosis and two broken hind legs, probably due to a fall or mistimed jump sometime during the night. Because of Bessie's age and the brittleness of her bones, the vet advised against having her legs put in casts since they would have difficulty healing and would likely only break again in the future.

The vet kept Bessie overnight while Betty weighed her options. Bessie had lived a long and happy life. She was deaf and mostly blind, but up until her fall, she had been completely mobile. Knowing that Bessie was now in pain and could no longer get around on her own helped Betty come to the difficult decision to put Bessie to sleep.

She drove to the vet's office to see Bessie one last time and held her frail body as the vet first injected a sedative and then a drug that stopped her heart.

My childhood dog Sage, died in my brother's arms on the way to the vet, so the option of euthanasia was never fully discussed. But unfortunately, this is more the exception than the rule. It's rare that sick or elderly pets slip away peacefully in their sleep. Northern Californian-based veterinarian and author of *Speaking for Spot*, Dr. Nancy Kay says that 98 percent of us who open our hearts and homes to pets will be confronted with this decision.

Dr. Kay offers this advice for helping us navigate one of the toughest choices of our lives:

Who should make the decision? "No one is better suited to make the decision about euthanasia for your pets than you," says Dr. Kay. We know our pets' habits and expressions and things that bring them joy and comfort better than anyone. "Although well-meaning friends and coworkers may offer their advice, it's important to remember that you are in the driver's seat," she advises. Our pets are our buddies and constant companions, which is why we are the ones with the most insight into the quality of their lives. But of course, deciding whether or not to put a pet to sleep is never without angst. "If it's not a struggle, you're not letting yourself go through the process and fully explore your feelings," Dr. Kay says.

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When is the right time? "One of the most common questions I'm asked when clients are contemplating euthanasia is, 'Is my pet in pain?'" says Dr. Kay. "But the way animals express pain can be inconsistent. That's why it's important to also take other factors into consideration." Your vet can help you determine if your pet's quality of life has diminished, whether because of pain or another kind of suffering.

Dr. Kay also recommends asking yourself these questions: Do the good days still outnumber the bad? Does your animal still get excited by the words you usually have to spell out (p-a-r-k, t-r-e-a-t, etc.) or the jangle of the car keys or the whirl of the can opener? "At the risk of sounding too 'wacky-Northern-Californian,' it really boils down to this: when you get down on your hands and knees and look into their eyes, do you still see that familiar spark that lets you know they want to keep going?" says Dr. Kay. Although her clients' greatest concern is often, "Am I doing this too early?" she says the problem is most commonly waiting too long – and the guilt that can accompany prolonging a hopeless situation.



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"It's better to err on the side of too soon," she says, but she also admits that there's no exact 'science' to making this decision. "It took me a full year to figure out what to do when my 17-year-old dog got sick," she says. Dr. Kay equates making this tough end-of-life decision with pay back for all of the tail wagging and unconditional love our pets have given us throughout their lives. "They need us to rise to the occasion," she says. "They are counting on us to be advocates for their happiness and quality of life."

Once I decide, what are my choices? You can absolutely choose to be present with your pet at the time of euthanasia – something Dr. Kay wholeheartedly encourages. She views a veterinarian's refusal to honor this request as "unacceptable" and says pet parents should not take no for an answer. "I believe that pets derive profound comfort and security from the presence of their beloved humans," she says. But, she adds, if the thought of watching your pet pass feels too overwhelming, you can consider asking a friend or family member to fill in on your behalf. She also recommends being super upfront with children about the family pet's euthanasia. Although it may or may not be appropriate for them to be present (depending on their age, etc.), children can be helped to understand the respect, love and humaneness behind such a decision.

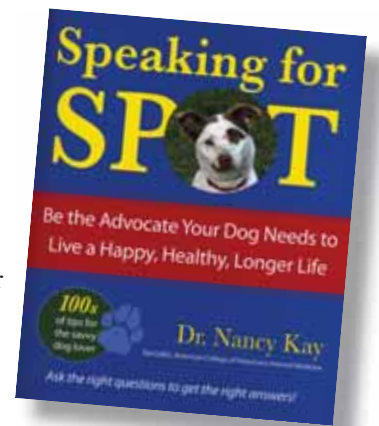
Where and how should it take place? Keep in mind that euthanasia doesn't have to happen in a clinical setting. Many vets make house calls, so if you and your pet are more comfortable at home or in the car, don't be afraid to voice your preferences. "One of my client's dogs felt most at home in the family van. I helped him pass away peacefully while "Danny Boy" drifted through the speakers," recalls Dr. Kay. Once you've made the decision to let your pet go, she encourages her clients to carve out some closure time. "Take that last trip to the beach or share a burger from the drive-thru," she advises. Closure can occur in just a few private moments in the event of a sudden crisis or accident, or can be planned over the course of a week. "When my clients tell me their crazy, fun, decadent stories they are usually smiling and I feel like laughing and crying at the same time," she says. "They've watched their pets experience fun and joy at the end of their lives."

What can I expect during and after the procedure? When a pet is euthanized, the vet administers an overdose of an anesthetic agent. It's a surprisingly fast process, says Dr. Kay – there is typically a quick, quiet and pain-free loss of consciousness within 10 to 20 seconds of administering the injection. Some vets prefer to sedate the animals first. For people who are opposed to euthanasia for religious, philosophical

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or moral reasons, hospice care can help make a terminally ill animal and her people as comfortable and at peace as possible.

How should I care for the remains? Most pet people opt for cremation with return of the ashes, while some have the means to accommodate a home, backyard burial for their pet. Many vets have standing arrangements with crematoriums as well as with local pet cemeteries to help you navigate the process. Taxidermy is also an option that, while creepy to some, might appeal to a select group of pet parents.



Speaking For Spot - Be the Advocate Your Dog Needs to Live a Happy, Healthy, Longer Life is available through Amazon.com

Amelia Glynn is a writer and editor based in San Francisco. She is a regular contributor to Tails of the City and more of her writing can be found at www.sfgate.com/pets.

What Remains

Your Options For Leaving Your Pet's Pawprint Behind

by Lisa Treen

It's never the most pleasant of subjects but as our pets' lives move into the twilight years, we have to search the recesses of our hearts as to whether we want to memorialize them and the choices to make for their remains.

You need to choose, in advance, what you want to have done when your pet passes away. Do you want to have your pet buried or cremated? Do you want to have it interred in a pet cemetery? Do you want an individual funeral service or simply having the pet taken away and cremated? Do you want a headstone or memorial?

Most people elect not to do more than have the vet handle disposal of the body but for those that do want something special cremation, runs at \$200-\$400 depending on the choice of receptacle while pet funerals and burial starts at about \$500 and average \$700 or more.

If you opt for cremation, the options for return are many– there's a variety of containers for the storage and display of your pet whether it's an urn or an attractive box. You can also opt for a scatter box if you want to spread the ashes in a special place. I like the idea of having a stone or memorial marker that can be placed in a part of the garden where your pet liked to sit or nap. Some years ago I had a special memorial bowl made for placement in the Sydney University's garden for my first dog Mick. The bowl is placed into the sandstone and it's nice to see it whenever I pop in for a routine visit. Mick's bowl is in special place but it also has a special purpose–funds raised from the bowls go directly to the teaching hospital. In some small way, my contribution is helping those who helped Mick in his last hours.

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You may not want to have the ashes returned but simply know that your pet was appropriately taken care of after passing on. The service you want to consider, should you need it, would involve picking up your pet from home or vet or other location. With due respect to vets and their need to bill for services, if you can, you should consider making this arrangement directly with a company that is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Where possible, same day collection is desirable and if being taken from your home, as we did, the way the pet is handled and removed is crucial to the closure of its passing.

Something to consider is whether you want a guaranteed individual cremation as in some cases, especially where pets have been collected from vets, they may be cremated en masse and combined ashes allocated to those who request them. I made sure that my cremation provider guaranteed this. Long-term readers of this magazine will remember that Jerri, my much loved Dalmatian, girl passed in the spring of 2007. She passed quickly and quietly in her own backyard. The service I chose was able to collect her late into the evening, once I had whispered my goodbyes.

Two employees of the company arrived in a purpose-built van and gently placed her onto a stretcher. They handled her body with great respect and I was relieved that even with her non-gender specific name, they referred to Jerri's gender correctly. She left my home with dignity and care.

A good service will deliver your pet's ashes quickly, within a few days. Some of the services can refer a 24 hour counseling and grief support referral service numbers. It's at this time that a caring cost-effective professional makes all the difference between expensive suffering and a sad transition that is appreciated despite the loss.

What you don't need and shouldn't tolerate are expensive and inappropriate add-ons that are pitched to with any pressure. What you do need to determine is a budget you will follow and a written quote so that you have it to refer to when the time comes. You should check the websites of different service providers as costs are often outlined there including the range of caskets, scatter boxes and services rendered.



Each of us have different ideas of what we want for the remains of our pets. Both dogs from my adulthood have been cremated. I didn't know whether I was going to find an appropriate place to scatter ashes. Over time I'm happy that I've retained Mick and Jerri's ashes in beautifully accented wooden boxes. Each has a brass plaque with their respective names on them. I know that by the time I hit eighty I'll have a collector's series of my past friends lining a mantle. That may seem a little creepy for some of you, but that's what it comes down to—personal choice.



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