

Both Ends of the Leash

Rites of Passage: Navigating the loss of a beloved dog

Patricia B. McConnell



Tulip was as beautiful in death as she was in life. Her long white fur covered her old thin body like a fluffy blanket. Her eyes were peacefully closed, and she looked as though she might wake up at any moment and plunk her huge white head in my lap for petting.

Tulip died at the admirable age of 12 years, 10 months, a legendary length of life for a Great Pyrenees. But this is not a column about Tulip, although, like many of our dogs, she deserves an entire Library of Congress written about her. Rather, it's a column about coping with the death of our beloved dogs, and specifically, about how best to cope in the hours right after they die.

Here's my advice: If you can, spend some time with the body of your dog after he or she has died. (My mother called dying "going aloft," and I will be forever grateful for the way that lilting expression lightens up the subject.) Staying with the body may be hard for some people, and if it's too hard, then you shouldn't do it. Coping with death and dying is an exquisitely personal thing and it's impossible to say what's best for everyone. But, here's the thing: Staying with the body provides a transition between a house rich with the sound and action of a living dog and a home still and silent in their complete absence.

After she died, Tulip lay on the living room floor all night long. I don't know how many times I sat beside her and stroked her forehead, or lay down beside her and inhaled the rich scent of her fur. Tulip was there, but, of course, she wasn't there. What was left was a bridge for me to walk between Tulip here and Tulip gone. It wasn't easy; I don't need to tell the readers

of Bark how deep the pain can be when we lose a beloved dog. But it helped. It helped.

We forget, in our industrialized society, how important the ritual of preparing the body for burial used to be. Strangers didn't do it; the family provided that last loving act, a final way of paying respect and saying good-bye. And even though we no longer wash and wrap the bodies of our loved ones, we haven't forgotten the importance of the body to those who are still alive. Look at the lengths to which we go to recover the remains of a person lost at sea. Literally hundreds of thousands of dollars can be spent to bring just one body home to the family, and no one ever complains about the cost. We instinctively know how important it is to have a physical contact with the body of a loved one. "Closure," we call it.

I wonder if dogs need closure too. I have kept the bodies of my deceased dogs overnight for my own sake, but also for the welfare of the other dogs in the house. I was motivated to do this by the stories of Andy Beck, a New Zealand horseman, who reports that mares allowed to stay with the body of a dead foal cope better than mares who have had their foals' bodies quickly taken away. I've had clients whose dogs waited at the window for the other dog to come home from the vet clinic – for weeks or months, and, in one case, years. Perhaps it is important for our pets to have closure too.

Not all dogs behave as if they are paying respect to the bodies of their compatriots, much less that they understand something as complex as death. (Young children also have a hard time grasping the concept; they'll say things such as, "I know Daddy is dead, but

when is he coming home?") Some dogs seem to pay no attention whatsoever to the body of a former housemate, and the dogs who do, may respond in a variety of ways. Many years ago, my dog Luke ignored his friend Misty's body all night until I prompted him to sniff her the next morning. I'll never forget the look in his eyes when he did – he reared back and looked straight into my eyes, his own eyes as round as pancakes. He seemed completely and utterly shocked. On the other hand, his niece, Pip, had circled Misty's body repeatedly right after her death, and then lay down beside it with a huge sigh. She lay there for hours and didn't leave for most of the night.

After Tulip died, 14-year-old Lassie curled into a stiff ball, radiating anxiety and tension. She lay down beside her and began to knead and suck on the blanket under the body. Young Will, who's about 18 months, sniffed the body like a frightened horse. Leaning backward, ready to bolt, he inhaled deeply and noisily for several moments. Then he turned, found a toy and ignored Tulip for the rest of the night. I have no idea what was going through either of their heads, but it feels right to let the animals of the household see and examine the body of a deceased dog. It's hard to imagine it hurting anything, and it seems intuitively true that it might help.

We buried Tulip's body on a nearby knoll, where in life, she had barked away the coyotes that threatened the spring lambs, or rolled in the cool snow. We surrounded her body with the hundreds of tulips that our friends brought to the house the afternoon of her death. As visitors flowed in to celebrate her life, Tulip stood on her flagging back legs and soaked up their attention like a diva. We told stories of the day she almost died in a snowstorm, trapped under logs at the edge of a cliff. I recounted the day I first met her, when I explained to her breeders that she was the only female of the group who I would not buy. Oh, she was the one who stole my heart – that was clear within the first five minutes – but she was also the one I couldn't take home because she was too active and feisty to be a good sheep-guarding dog. I ended up with her anyway. Lucky me.

She's still here, I know, as much a part of the farm as the hills above the barn and the lambs in the pasture. In spring, the tulips planted last fall decorated the

landscape with life and color. How sweet the sight of them was.

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