

The Right Way to Say Goodbye

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The day I sat down to write this article was the day a funeral was held for a human friend of mine. He had been killed in a car accident two months previously, and various investigations/complications had delayed the burial. As friends and family awaited the funeral, I recalled anew how important such events are to those of us left behind. Yes, they celebrate the lost life, but in bringing together those who mourn the person, they allow us to grieve together in a way that helps us heal. The closure they provide enables us to move forward with our lives. Additionally, the placement of some sort of headstone or marker provides a sense of finality as well as a beautiful way to make a statement that someone special was on this earth, for a time that is always too short.

If we can shape some sort of equivalent experience in honor of one of our beloved cats, it seems likely it could provide equivalent benefits: comfort, closure, and where appropriate, a coming together of people whose lives were touched by the cat. Yet, very few of us are able to create such an opportunity to celebrate our Rainbow Bridge babies. We feel it is making too big a fuss, we may not have the time, our friends are too busy to be there, or we simply don't know how to proceed.

“Might I Have a Bit of Earth?”

This quote from the children's classic, *The Secret Garden* speaks to many of us who do not necessarily have an appropriate space available to bury a pet who has passed. Having once taken advantage of a yard space offered by a friend for this purpose, I would caution you to only use a bit of earth over which you have full control and ownership. Going forward, you will likely want to mark the spot in some way, which is not necessarily an option if you've utilized a friend's yard. It doesn't have to be a headstone or marker (although there are plenty of these available for pets). You may wish to plant something at the gravesite. . . a flowering shrub is ideal because when it blooms, you will think of your lost furchild and see something beautiful growing where it lies. You also want to choose the location carefully. Be sure it is not in an area that is likely to be flooded, and of course you don't want to disturb any underground pipelines! Be sure to check local ordinances as many areas may limit your ability to conduct a home burial. Also, if your cat passed due to euthanasia, talk to your vet about safety measures to make sure that no other animals are able to access your pet and be poisoned by the lethal medicine

used to help them to pass or an illness from which your pet suffered.

Assuming you DO have an appropriate space, you may wish to wrap your kitty in its favorite bed or blanket and/or accompany it with its favorite toy. It's best to provide some kind of biodegradable container as a coffin. Many options are available online. You can even find them at Amazon. Be sure to dig a fairly deep hole to prevent neighborhood predators from disturbing the grave. Three feet is advisable. That way, you will be filling in the grave with about two and a half feet of dirt, which should be sufficient in most suburban areas. If your home is more rural, dig deeper.

Most importantly, you do not want to undertake this task alone, IF POSSIBLE. Grief needs company. Ask a friend to be at your side for support. And consider using the brief memorial service in the sidebar. It's a beautiful and respectful way to let go.

Dealing with the Double Whammy

Those of us who reside in more urban areas usually have space constraints and opt for cremation rather than burial. If you've chosen a private cremation, this means you

Dr. Rebecca Schoenberg, a hospice-focused vet based in Medford, Massachusetts, speaks eloquently to the value of devising your own special way to say goodbye to a pet:

“As a culture, we have traditions for how to grieve the loss of people we love, but we have no such cultural framework for grieving the loss of a beloved pet. Even as we realize more and more how important they are in our lives, and the significance of the relationships we have with them, there's no map for how to navigate such a loss.

Without this, people can wind up left on their own to find a path through the grief that comes with losing a beloved pet. However, this also gives us the space and opportunity to create a personalized ceremony or memorial that reflects both our own values and beliefs and the special and unique relationship we had with our animal companion, and honors the incredibly important space they held in our heart and our life.”

This article is intended to offer you some useful starting points for such a memorial.

not only have the pain of watching your pet pass, you get hit with a double whammy of grief when you receive the little box with your friend's ashes in it a week or so later. It is truly like losing them twice. That is one reason why, when Dr. Schoenberg cremates a pet, she personally delivers the ashes to the owners, providing them with a sounding board for this second wave of loss, should it be needed.

While you're waiting for your kitty to come home this way, prepare for the upcoming blow by planning how you will say goodbye down the road. Just because you are dealing with ashes instead of a body, it doesn't mean you can't use the memorial service provided here.

In fact, it works very well if you plan to scatter the ashes. . . and equally well if you wish to do a burial in a small space. One of the most touching ways I have seen to honor a lost pet is to use one of the planter urns sold by Urns Northwest (<https://urnsnw.com/memorial-tree-urns/>). They are eco-friendly, sustainable planters that hold both your pet's ashes, starter soil, and seeds to grow the tree of your choice.

Many of us (myself included) simply decide to keep those little boxes as cherished keepsakes, some with the notion of taking these



Sources for the Service:

Three Rituals – "Funeral Rite for Pets", "Funeral Rite for Cremation", and "Funeral Rite for Burial" from: <http://www.pagan-transitions.org.uk/rites.html>
<http://www.pagan-transitions.org.uk/rituals/pets.htm>
<http://www.pagan-transitions.org.uk/rr/poems1.htm>
<http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/prayersforadeceasedpet/qt/PrayersCats.htm>
<http://www.thecatsthe.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-205478.html>
<http://www.godblesstheanimals.com/tp40/page.asp?id=33521>

For More Information

Schoenberg, Dr. Becky, "Memorials," November 3, 2016, *Autumn Care and Crossings*, <https://autumnvet.com/2016/11/03/memorials/>
 See also: <https://autumnvet.com/resources/>

Valentini, Kristin, "11 Touching Memorial Ideas to Honor your Furry Friend," March 10, 2022, <https://www.dailypaws.com/living-with-pets/pet-owner-relationship/grief/pet-memorial-ideas>

Winch, Guy, "Why We Need to Take Pet Loss Seriously," May 22, 2018, *Scientific American*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-we-need-to-take-pet-loss-seriously/>

ashes with us on our own final journeys. I am starting to think this may prevent us from fully working through the loss because it does not include any sort of formal goodbye to the pet. However, there's no reason why we can't come back to honor the cat with a memorial gesture at some point in the future, perhaps on the next anniversary of its passing. I just may do this.

Another one-of-a-kind way to remember a cherished pet – particularly if you are not able to create a marker or stone—is to take an ink impression of its paw and take the result to a tattoo artist. It truly touched my heart when a returning kitten client showed me her "ink" of one of my older show cats who had shared her home in retirement. (above) Pawprint kits are readily available online. I like the one Chewy offers, which does not actually get ink on the paw. (Note: clay paw impressions do not work well for this purpose.)

Remember to take care of yourself throughout your grieving journey. It's not just about the cat who has passed but about the loss of the special bond the two of you had. Pet-loss support hotlines and online support groups are readily available (see information at the end of this article). Don't hesitate to take advantage of them and connect with others who are feeling the way you do. Recognizing and acknowledging the pain you feel is the key first step to eventually moving past it, and creating some sort of a memorial can definitely help.

Alexis Mitchell has created a multi-part pet memorial garden in her yard, complete with a real Rainbow Bridge. These photos were taken on the anniversary of a Maine Coon Cat named Sally's passing, after having left mementos at her place.



While the memorial service included here is designed to be customized for any pet, it was inspired by the tragic loss of a Siberian kitten who succumbed to complications of a failed surgery to correct a genetic defect. It is provided here for your use as is (simply fill in your pet's information as indicated—it works for dogs too) or to offer inspiration for you to create your own memorial ceremony specific to your pet.



Remembering your pet's name (insert birth date – passing date)

(ring cat toy bell)

O Great Spirit - Mother and Father of us all, we ask for your blessing on this our ceremony of thanksgiving and honoring and blessing. God, we thank You for the joy we knew because we were privileged to share a portion of our life with _____.

We miss him/her very much.

We celebrate the life of _____ during the period of time that we were able to share with him/her in our earthly life experience. We celebrate also the new life experience that s/he is enjoying, beyond our sight, free of all earthly limitations.

(light a candle)

May this light help guide _____ to a place of peace and love.

And may the power of the flame give us strength on our healing journey.

Pause for shared memories/eulogies from individual family members or others who knew the pet

Releasing the Spirit

_____ - now you are free

You have crossed over into the spirit realm.

Now you are finally free of illness.

Your body is no longer sick, or weak, or hurting.

Now you can play and run with the others.

And as the wheel of creation turns, may you find a place of joy in your next life.

(Scatter _____'s ashes or drop a handful of soil on the grave)

Mother Earth, we return to you _____, one of your children.

His/her spirit will return to her ancestors, and s/he will continue to live in our memories.

We are thankful that we were able to share our lives with him/her, and give him/her to your loving arms.

(for a cat)

Bast, Sekhmet, we give you back your child.

Noble, regal, honorable cat.

Watch over him/her, and guide him/her on the way to the spirit world.

May s/he be blessed in your names, and hunt ever after beside you.

(for a dog)

Anubis, Cerberus, we give you back your child.

Noble, regal, honorable dog.

Watch over him/her, and guide him/her on the way to the spirit world.

May s/he be blessed in your names, and hunt ever after beside you.

God's Light surrounds you, God's Love enfolds you, God's Power protects you, God's Presence watches over you -- wherever you are, God is -- and all is well.

(ring bell)

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