

When I was a six-year-old boy, my parents moved to Coventry, Rhode Island. Our new next-door-neighbors, the Gerbers, included Pete, my age and soon-to-be best friend, and his older brother, John. While my parents were not yet willing to take on the responsibility of a dog (that would take two years of begging from my two older brothers and me), the Gerbers, on the other hand, were rich in animal companions. Their family included Fifi, a tiny, delicate, grey and white cat; Tom, an enormous orange tabby; and a seventy-pound, mostly reddish-brown and black, long-haired, dog of indeterminate parentage named Zeke. I remember the three of them as if 1966 were yesterday, and though each of these animal friends touched me, it was Zeke who grabbed my little-boy heart.

Zeke relentlessly nudged Pete and me when he wanted attention, which was most of the time we shared his company. He was always up for a game of fetch with a stick, ball, or Frisbee, and no day of fishing would have been complete without Zeke's look-out-he's-gonna-shake-all-over-you, soggy-dog smell, company. His black velveteen muzzle fronted a broad retriever face, and he considered us pups through soft dark eyes, the eyes of a canine sage.

In those days before the wisdom of leash laws and neutering, Zeke periodically disappeared for two or three days at a time. He would return home damp, his fur fringed with pond muck. We'd guess that he had swum across Johnson's Pond, the largest body of water in our area and the pond on whose banks we enjoyed our best days of fishing. I can still feel the sense of mystery that surrounded our "what ifs" when our friend disappeared: was Zeke really a spy sent on secret missions and living with Pete's family just his cover? Today, of course, I imagine that our wandering lothario was making his rounds, visiting a string of female friends.

When Pete and I were seven, Zeke disappeared forever. I can still visit the pain when we realized we would never see or touch Zeke again. In my mind's eye I see Pete's mother leading her two sons, along with my brothers and me, in a reading of goodbye letters, followed by a trip to the local soft-serve ice cream shop. On the drive home we celebrated our friend's life and marked his passing with stories to remember him by, more tears, and drippy ice cream cones.

Zeke lives in my heart today. He's joined there by Shaggy, the dog of my begging boyhood who became a member of my own family and died while I was away at college; Pinky, my first rabbit; and the many other companion animals who have shared my life. Each brought me joy, each taught me something about the nature of love, and each left me struggling through the journey of grief. For all the sorrow that these losses brought, however, I've never regretted sharing my life with any one of these souls. As that wise woman promised so many years ago, love proved worth its cost every time.

So let us begin our journey of love, grief, and discovery.

This book offers simple truths about the nature of grief and suggestions on how best to care for yourself through its duration. The chapters that follow will also help you manage the sometimes challenging responses of family members, friends, and coworkers, prepare for the fact that people grieve differently, navigate the feelings that accompany a decision to euthanize, decide what to do with your companion's remains, decide if and when to adopt another pet, decide whether or not

it makes sense to consult a behavioral health professional, and help the children in your life with their grief.

Respecting the way that grief often limits attention spans, we've strived to deliver much helpful information in a minimum of text. Each chapter concludes with a list of summary points to help you remember what's most important. The book's small size also makes it easy to carry as a ready source of support.

Because stories help us gain understanding, you'll find many in the pages that follow. We share stories from people who have participated in our pet loss support groups, friends, members of our families, and our own life experiences. We have altered details to screen identities and, in some cases, drawn more than one real-life account into a composite.

We bring you these stories because each teaches something important about the journey of grief, the enduring value of love despite inevitable loss, and the special place that animal companions claim within our lives as a whole. This last point, I should explain, finds its origin in our profession of family therapy. You will see that we look at grief from a perspective that considers its effects upon relationships with family members, friends, your workplace, and community.

If you have recently lost an animal companion, we ask you to revisit the beginning of this chapter. Remember, your deep sadness reflects the intensity of your love for your departed friend. Your friend lived richly as the recipient of your great love. And while we convey this suggestion with some apprehension as we know it may mean little at present, we hope you allow yourself to imagine a moment sometime in the future. In that moment some time from now, you'll know that to have loved so fully means you have received one of the most special gifts that life grants us.

Please be gentle with yourself. Remember that you deserve special care during this challenging time and resolve to treat yourself accordingly.