

From the Rainbow Bridge to the Gates of Valhalla: Coming Alongside Those Grieving Pet Loss

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Abstract

Chaplaincy work has many possibilities. There is perhaps no place where there is suffering where chaplaincy could not find itself useful. We often hear about hospice, hospital, or prison chaplains. We hear much less so about the topic of animal chaplaincy. This type of chaplaincy is unique in many ways, not the least of which is that it does not just involve humans. Our pets are important parts of our lives. They are often our most constant companions and the bonds we form with them are precious. When pet owners find themselves in situations such as hospice or loss, the grief experienced can be intense and the support may be lacking. There are some resources available, but not as many as there are people who need support. I believe that this paper demonstrates that animal chaplaincy is a much needed area of exploration and work for chaplains. To encourage this work, I have outlined how the Three Tenets can be a framework of support. Chaplains may find that anchoring themselves in Not Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Compassionate Action can assist them in coming alongside those who are experiencing this unique type of grief and loss. Through case studies, I offer an example of what it might be like for chaplains to work with those grieving their animals.

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Tiny God of Thunder: Thor's Story

In the summer of 2003, I moved away from my small hometown and found myself living alone for the first time. After a few months, friends decided I needed a companion. There were plenty of barns where I grew up and those barns had plenty of cats. A friend visited three different barns to find the right kitten: the one who walked right up to say hello. This was the kitten who was gifted to me.

Over twenty years later, I still remember meeting Thor for the first time. He greeted me the same as he did my friend and the way he would continue to greet any stranger that walked through his front door, without any timidity. His name started out as a joke from a friend (who thought it would be funny for a tiny kitten to be named for a god of thunder) but would become quite fitting.

Thor was just about three months old when he came to live with me and I was 22. He was my first real pet and first responsibility outside of myself. I remember telling my friend that I wasn't sure I could keep him. Me? Keep another living being alive? But Thor worked his magic and I fell in love. Over the years, he was there through everything. He moved many apartments with me, saw me through break ups and other losses, laid with me when I was sick. If I stayed up too late at night, he pestered me to go to bed. He'd also act as my alarm clock in the morning, saving me from being late many times. He was a steady presence in the sea of life's uncertainty.

Around 2015, we caught Thor's kidney disease. It was very early on and we tracked it for several years until he took a swift decline. In October of 2020, he was 17 years old and still running around, playing what we called blanket games, and generally being anything other than a geriatric cat. By the following spring, his kidney disease had advanced.

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The months that followed included many trips to the vet, days on the kitchen floor together trying to get him to eat, diet changes, medications, and subcutaneous fluids. Thor, a bit of a demanding cat his whole life, got into the habit of waking me up in the middle of the night and not letting me rest until I went with him to sleep on the couch. I look back on these months as some of the hardest and most heartbreaking.

In August of 2021, I noticed that Thor's breathing had changed as well as a couple of other symptoms and made a vet appointment. I expected that we would just do some medication changes and then be on our way. On August 27th, 2021, I was told that there were complications due to not only his kidneys, but also his heart. We could not treat one without harming the other. We said our goodbyes that day. Thor was not the first cat I had had to see pass, but he was the first cat that had been solely mine for almost 18 years. We had spent almost my entire adult life together.

During his life, he made many things possible that would not have been otherwise. He opened my heart to animals and other beings in a way that I could not have predicted. He raised three other kittens and tolerated one small dog, none of whom would have been with us if he had not come first. He was a steady companion through everything. He became the vet's office poster cat for arthritis treatment for cats, as he would tolerate many trips to the vet for laser therapy. He was never shy about asking for what he wanted or needed. I can still hear his voice echo in my head.

It's clear to me that he taught me many things. One of the biggest that stands out is that of unconditional love. He did not care in what state I was in. He stayed with me through migraines, break-ups, and losses. He welcomed me home every day. It was a consistency that I was unaccustomed to from humans, but Thor gave love without judgment or worry if I deserved it.

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He didn't have to even think about the idea of deserving love. He just loved.

When Thor died, I found myself unable to resonate with the usual idea of the “rainbow bridge,” an image often offered to those who have lost pets. The idea is that when an animal passes away, their spirit passes over the rainbow bridge into an idyllic place where they play and exist until their owner joins them at the time of their own passing. On my social media post announcing Thor's death, a friend offered the sentiment that he would be welcomed at the gates of Valhalla. An image more in line with his name and its history in Norse Mythology, Valhalla is supposed to be a hall full of celebration for those passing (mostly while in battle). I was so delighted at the idea of my little cat showing up to his namesake's homeland. It made a difference in my grieving to find something with which I could relate to or that could at least lift my spirits a little.

Why Animal Chaplaincy

In telling Thor's story, I am reminded of why I chose to explore animal chaplaincy in the first place: the deep grief that I feel at the loss of my companion still lives in me each day. I know this to be true for others as well. Animals are some of our closest friends. The intense season of caregiving that I went through with Thor leading up to his death was a study in love and connection of a unique sort.

Prior to Thor's passing, I had not considered animal chaplaincy a true possibility in terms of an area in which to explore. I found myself so surprised by the level of grief and loss that I felt, that I became curious. Why didn't it feel like there were more resources? When I was going through the months of intense care with him, why had there not been a place for support? Why did it feel like pet loss was somehow lesser than human loss? It was only after Thor's passing and when I started to seek answers to these questions that things came together for me in regards

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to the importance of animal chaplaincy.

In speaking with animal owners and veterinary professionals alike, the overwhelming consensus seems to be that there is not enough recognition for the deep grief or support for it. One veterinarian shared with me that out of the emails their hospital receives, about 20% deal with pet grief. Most animal hospitals are not equipped in training or time to deal with that level of needed support. When one looks at the numbers of animal loss, it's no wonder that so many are reaching out. One hospital that I spoke with said that they averaged about 21.5 animal deaths per month for the first eight months of 2022 and that did not include patients who died in emergency or other facilities.

To add to the complexity of seeking support, pet grief and hospice care are often dismissed as a lesser experience of grief and suffering than that of their human equivalents. Not only is support not often widely available to those grieving animal companions, but too often what is available does not address the unique experiences of pet grief. Pet owners can find themselves unable to know how to handle the loss. Something like the idea of the Rainbow Bridge, which is the prevailing afterlife story related to animals, is not one that resonates with all people and is unable to hold the variety of experiences that people have while grieving a pet. Coming alongside those in pet grief requires acknowledging the deep connection of all sentient beings and the unique experiences and viewpoints of those who grieve. Using the framework of The Three Tenets (discussed later in this paper), we can discover ways to be with those experiencing pet grief that honor its unique journey.

The Truth of Grief

Grief: even the word feels heavy. Grief. Death. Bereavement. All words that we try to avoid even though we know deep down that all we love will be lost to us. Weller (2015) says, “grief

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and love are sisters, woven together from the beginning. Their kinship reminds us that there is no love that does not contain loss and no loss that is not a reminder of the love we carry...”

It doesn't take much analysis to realize that we do not handle grief well as a Western culture. Even more “understandable” grief, such as that of a parent or other human loved one, is still a mystery for many. Those who are mourning seem to be given a certain amount of time with which to do so before they are expected to be “over it” or to “move on.” We would rather sweep it under the rug, hide those mourning away, than to face the truth of loss and our own discomfort with big emotions.

The truth of grief is that it will happen to all of us. We know that death is inevitable and yet, we still try to turn away from it. This can only compound what our grieving process might look like. Grieving an animal is especially complicated. As Frank Ostaseski says, “grief is love with no place to go” and that is true of both losing human and animal companions (F Ostaseski, personal communication, August 17, 2021).

Animal grief: Why is it so hard?

Grieving an animal has both similarities and differences from the grief one experiences when losing a human loved one. In fact, Dr Wallace Sife, founder of the Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement, says that pet grief is “completely different from bereavement for a dearly loved human, and it is wrong to compare them” (Sife 2014). Our relationships with people can become complicated by ego, hardships, arguments, and experiences. We can become estranged or otherwise separated from other humans. Animal relationships are not always so complicated

With animals, “our bonds... are in many ways stronger, purer, and far more intimate” than with that of the other humans in our life (Sife 2014). Our pets rely on us for every part of their existence and are with us through everything as our constant companions. Our relationships are

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never clouded by any malice or pretenses. The Dalai Lama reflects that “animals can be more honest than humans, sometimes” (Tahseen 2012). They cannot judge us by any standards that a human might. If we fail them, they still seem to return our love. Humans are not always able to do those things.

Wallace Sife (2014) captures the essence of the human-animal bond:

This relationship offers us a chance to share and express our pure selves without needing to feel defensive for our actions or feelings. Companion animals give us our greatest opportunities to express love, without ever having to worry about being judged or rejected. They give us back a devotion that is unmatched by any other relationship, in a very private and intimate emotional exchange. And when they die, we mourn for the totality of the unique bond we had (pg 31).

My own experiences mirror that which Sife shares. Thor was my truest confidant. I have lost a variety of humans in my life, but no loss has been like that of this particular cat who shared my life with me, day in and day out. When speaking with a friend about the loss, she shared that in her own experiences of a death close to her, she felt as if her “feelings apparatus just wasn’t big enough to hold [the feelings]. It felt like a scaffolding was being dismantled, and that I could build a bigger frame to be able to hold the bigness of the feelings.” (K Nique, personal communication, August 31, 2021). This resonated with me significantly. To hold the grief of animal loss is to hold some of the most complicated grief we may experience.

Specific Complications of Pet Loss

When we speak about pet loss, it’s important to consider what specifically complicates this type of grief. It is not just the closeness with which we experience our relationship with our pets,

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but there are other factors as well. It should be noted that there are many things that can complicate any kind of grief, including for our human losses. What we discuss in this section is unique to our animals and is also not an exhaustive list.

When bringing a new pet home, the first thing on someone's mind might not be the shortness of animal life versus that of a human. This can be hard to really take in, even up until the time that the pet is becoming elderly and approaching the end of their life. In fact, people often deny that their animals will die or don't recognize the shorter life span (Sife 2014). In my own life, it has never once occurred to me the length of time that I was committing to a new animal. The pet was with me for the time being and that was what mattered. I don't think this is an unusual experience.

Because of their shorter lives and our deep connections to them, it is not surprising that we often do anything we can to help prolong our animals' lives. This too can bring on complications in our grief. When it comes to an animal, they cannot speak to us about how they're feeling. We must make the best decisions for their care based on advice from veterinary professionals and our own knowledge of our pet. But what if we're wrong? Or what if we don't have the finances to take every measure that we can for the sake of our animal? The doubt and even guilt that can creep in about the care of our animals can impact grief. Something for people to remember is that "death does not mean failure or catastrophe. Instead, death most often means that our friend's life simply has to come to an end as all lives eventually do" (Dolan-Del Vecchio & Saxton-Lopez, 2013).

Another piece of the grief puzzle is euthanasia¹. For pets, euthanasia can be used for many

¹ While there could be an exploration of the morality of euthanasia -- especially through a Buddhist lens -- this paper will not take that path. Euthanasia for animals is a fact of their care.

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things that do not just include old age and poor health. Often people find themselves faced with the choice of euthanizing for behavioral reasons. Finances can also be a reason that euthanasia may be considered when faced with costly treatment for an illness. The complication of euthanasia in terms of grief cannot be understated. In a review of literature surrounding pet loss, Cleary et al. (2022), discovered that “the decision to euthanize a pet was described as a complex one, exacerbated by the closeness of the human-pet bond.” They noted that guilt was often involved in the decision and that it might be “compounded by ‘anticipatory grief,’ which was experienced in the days, months and even years leading up to euthanasia once the owner felt that this outcome was inevitable” (Cleary et al., 2022). Rarely at another time of our lives is such a decision in our hands: to allow a creature to continue living (often in pain) or to end some kind of suffering. While the decision does not often come easily or without doubts, it is important to know that “euthanizing a pet almost always leaves guardians reeling with questions...

Incidentally, guardians whose pets die *without* the assistance of euthanasia often find themselves posing very similar questions” (Dolan-Del Vecchio & Saxton-Lopez, 2013). It seems that however death arrives for our pets, it is rarely easy or without some level of doubt.

While death is one way that animals leave us, there are others that cause similar kinds of grief. For instance, we may lose pets during a breakup or divorce. We know that the animal is out there, but it can't be with us. While there may be comfort in knowing they are being taken care of, the loss of companionship is very real and may be more complicated by the emotions surrounding what took them away such as the ending of a relationship. Pets may also be lost

Some owners choose this option and others do not. As chaplains, it is not our position to pass judgment on the choice of those before us, but to be with them through the process and beyond.

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because they go missing. Maybe a cat was accidentally let outside or a dog got off its leash and ran. Sife (2014) talks about the unique qualities of these losses: “When a pet disappears, some of the stages of bereavement are intensified and distorted. And they are always underscored by uncertainty and an overwhelming sense of failed responsibility” (pg 152). He goes on to say that there is almost always a lack of closure from this type of loss. Without knowing the outcome of the pet and possibility of hope that may always feel present, it is hard to let go.

One unique complication around pet loss has to do with other pets. When Thor left us, I had a lot of concerns about how our other animals might deal with it. There are many stories about how animals deal with the grief of other animals. A friend of mine recently told me that their horse had formed such a strong bond with another horse that if one of the pair died, the other would inevitably have to go soon after. The grief that the companion animal would feel would just be too great. There are also many stories of animals who seemed to know that it was time for the sick or elderly pet to go and so they stayed with them until their last breath. These are all anecdotal, but real examples that can complicate the way that we process our own pet grief while also dealing with our concern for other animals.

Animals in Buddhist and Christian Traditions

A discussion of animal chaplaincy would not be complete without considering how animals are framed in our religions. For the purposes of this paper, we will specifically look at Buddhism, but we will also consider Christian traditions. As we will see, Christianity does not always have a lot to say on the topic, but its influence is still present in our society.

In all sects of Buddhism, we speak often about sentient beings. Do we understand this to include human beings alone, or are other creatures also considered? It is easy to imagine dedicating merit to or working for the good of our fellow humans, but what of animals? “As a

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species, we ignore the sentience of other beings because they don't speak a language we can easily understand" (Michie 2017). But just because our language and lives are different, could we not consider animals as sentient beings?

In a review of the teachings of the Buddha, Bronwynn Finnigan (2018) notes that "non-human animals *were* explicitly regarded as sentient — they are thought to have a range of conscious experiences (along a spectrum), are motivated by a range of psychological states, and are susceptible to suffering." Finnigan elaborates:

That the Buddha considered animals to have moral significance is evident in his condemnation of occupations that involve slaughtering animals (*Samyutta Nikāya* 19), instruction for monks to avoid wearing animal skins and prohibition of behaviour that intentionally causes animals harm (*Majjhima Nikāya* 41). The Buddha also encouraged his disciples to help animals where they could, which includes rescuing them and setting them free (*Dīgha Nikāya* 5).

As the Buddha encouraged, our care and consideration for sentient beings must reach past humans to include animals as well. David Michie (2017) argues that animals have the same potential for enlightenment, something that seems overlooked. Even if that were not the case, they would still be deserving of attention and care. "With regard to animals, they not only have life, but feelings of pleasure and pain too. We should treat their lives with respect," says His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2012).

Another aspect of Buddhism that seems quite important to the discussion of our animal relationships is that of interconnection. If we can see the logic behind the interconnection of all things, then it is not such a stretch to imagine that that interconnection extends to animals as sentient beings. The recognition of the interconnection and sentience of animals helps to negate

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any argument that our feelings toward our pets and our grief about their loss, is no less valid.

Some religions are not as clear on their considerations of animals: “across Christian traditions there is no consensus about the inner lives of animals” (Michie 2017). In cases such as this, we can see where pet relationships (grief included) may become especially complicated for those whose religion does not provide a framework. More questions than answers may arise as so much focus is only on relationships with other humans. This may happen with Buddhists as well depending on the view of sentience, possibility of enlightenment, and so on. With relationships as intimate as those between a pet and its owner, the spiritual can make things quite complex.

One way that Christianity directly impacts the grief process of a pet for many is the concept of The Rainbow Bridge (see Appendix A). The Rainbow Bridge is not unlike the widely accepted Christian idea of heaven: illness is taken away, pets await the return of their owners, and they are reunited in an ideal scene. This could be a very comforting thought to many, but it does not recognize the wide-ranging beliefs of animal lovers or the very individual experience of pet grief.

Analysis of Current Pet Grief Resources

Before addressing my own suggestions on how chaplains can be a support to those grieving animals, it should be noted that there are currently some resources available. The prevalence of some may be dependent on geography. The types of resources may appeal to some and not others. Just as in human grieving, there is no one size fits all for grief support.

While researching this paper, I found many books on the topic of pet loss, some of which are quoted here. My exploration of these texts, however, came up lacking in ways that felt similar to the Rainbow Bridge: they felt like something I could not relate to. In many instances, it felt as if pet loss was put into a neat package instead of acknowledging what Frank Ostaseski

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refers to as “the wildness of grief” (personal communication, August 2021). Some of these books also looked at this type of loss from a particular and primarily Christian perspective, again something that does not resonate with everyone.

Support groups also do exist in some places. It does not seem that these groups are offered often or everywhere. In fact, when I was facing the loss of Thor, it was not ever mentioned to me that there might be support groups in my area. It is unclear whether this is due to a lack of advertising or lack of availability.

There are some other resources such as veterinary social workers that seem even less prevalent than support groups or literature. It is heartening to know that they are out there and that there are indeed some animal chaplains doing this work already. That said, just as in support groups, these personal resources are not readily available for all who might wish to access them.

In a somewhat recent study, Park & Royal discovered that a large majority of pet owners (74.7%) “mourned [their loss] privately” (2020). They noted that “self-isolation may be a choice made by bereaved companion animal owners, but another possibility is that this behavior is a result of the disenfranchised experience of companion animal loss” (Park & Royal 2020). As we’ve already explored, the complicated nature of pet grief may be part of the reason for this private grieving. While most study participants kept to themselves, some did seek support from family or friends. Still smaller groups did things like adopt a new pet or “relied on faith,” while a total of .9% participated in support groups (Park & Royal 2020). Again, this could be due to geographic issues and lack of resources.

While there are some resources available, there are many reasons to grow the support opportunities. Just as any human grief, those in mourning over their animals deserve to have the resources that can help them heal. That may be deciding to mourn privately, but it may also look

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like something else that they can relate to and find healing in. I believe animal chaplains can help expand the care offered.

The Three Tenets and their Applications

Those who work with people in grief know that it can be beneficial to all involved to have a framework with which to work. One way to approach animal chaplaincy is by using the lens of the Three Tenets. I chose the Three Tenets because of their ability to encourage connection and meet even the most unique of circumstances with openness.

The Three Tenets were developed in 1994, by Roshi Bernie Glassman, a Zen Buddhist priest and founder of the Zen Peacemaker Order (Zen Peacemakers International [ZPI], n.d.). The Tenets are “powerful upayas (skillful means) for working with the suffering of others” (Halifax, 2021). They include Not Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Taking Action. It should be noted that while they are named separately, “each tenet reflects the others; they are seamlessly embedded in each other” (ZPI, n.d.).

Not Knowing

The very idea of not knowing is counter to our cultural norm. Our current society promotes the idea of always knowing or seeming to know what is happening around us. We’re encouraged to always have an opinion about a topic. Not Knowing, on the other hand, is letting go of fixed ideas about yourself, others, and the universe. Not Knowing “trains you to continually set aside fixed points of view” which could create a quite limited understanding of what’s before us (ZPI, n.d.). Instead, Not Knowing allows us to be open and to create space in the situation.

When we sit with another person in grief, practicing Not Knowing can bring a foundation to that presence. We can stay open to the person who is before us and allow ourselves to be fully

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with them. We don't have to know what they're going to say or how they are going to feel. We don't even have to know every detail of what has happened and we certainly do not have to pass judgment or pretend to know what we do not. We can be just with what is in front of us in the moment.

Bearing Witness

As we sit with Not Knowing, we are able to open to Bearing Witness. We can "see all the aspects of a situation" and that includes what you bring with you like your judgments (ZPI, n.d.). When we Bear Witness, we are present for both the joy and suffering in the world. We do not turn away from whatever is before us. Instead, we "open to the uniqueness of whatever is arising and meet it just as it is." (ZPI, n.d.)

When we sit with someone facing difficult circumstances, Bearing Witness can bring us into a state of presence that allows someone to be truly seen. We must let go of what we brought with us into the room, whether that be expectations, judgments, opinions, and so on. We let these things go and we are simply present as Glassman (1998) explains:

The training and practice... is to witness. Not to deny, but to broaden, our vision. Not to teach but to listen. It's an ever-deepening, never-ending practice. And it starts and ends with unknowing. We don't bear witness to tell other people what to do with their lives. After many years of study, teaching, and peacemaking, I realized that I was deluded, that I would always be deluded, that I will never get to a place where I know, and that therefore I will penetrate the unknown and bear witness forever. And that means bearing witness, letting go, bearing witness, letting go, bearing witness, and letting go.

This act of being present to someone in their suffering can have dramatic effects: "out of that

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bearing witness a healing will arise” (Glassman, 1998). In the circumstances of grief, healing can happen or begin from being seen. Presence is a powerful gift that we can give.

Taking Action

Sometimes this Tenet is called Compassionate Action. Whichever your preferred word choice, the intent is the same: “loving action, the goal of which is to reduce suffering” (Glassman, 1998). Sometimes the action that is needed is simply to continue to be in Not Knowing and Bearing Witness (ZPI, n.d.). There may be other actions that are correct or compassionate to take, but Not Knowing and Bearing Witness should inform the decision behind that action.

In order for us to take action in a way that reduces suffering, we must take away our judgements first and remain open to what the true need is in the situation. It can be easy to find ourselves clouded by our own ideas of what is correct. Instead of following this initial instinct, we must take the time to check in, include our own reactions in our Bearing Witness, and then move from a place of compassion and care.

Application to animal chaplaincy

While it could be said that the Three Tenets are useful for any chaplain in any capacity, animal chaplaincy has many unique factors that make the Three Tenets a special application.

What I have come to understand of grief is that it is different for every loss. No two are alike and the feelings and journey varies with each one. There is no way to predict what it will feel like. This is true with our pets, our humans, and other losses we experience. This is where Not Knowing can become especially important. In terms of pet loss, Not Knowing is the only place we can exist when we come alongside those who are experiencing it. The deep connections we

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have with our animals and the varied experiences of grief dictate that we cannot know. We cannot begin to assume what another is feeling. Each relationship with an animal is special in its own way and so each interaction regarding that relationship is unique as well.

An important piece of Not Knowing in perhaps any grief related interaction is remaining curious about what someone perceives of the afterlife. For animals, it has primarily been cast in terms of the Rainbow Bridge. In my own experience, the Rainbow Bridge did not fit. I did not consider it possible for Thor to be frolicking along in a meadow with all the other animals we've known, as the story tells us. First, he didn't have a lot of other animal friends as an indoor house cat. Second, he was not a frolicking through fields type of cat, but a much more typical, demanding house cat. So when someone took his name and made a play on it about him showing up at the gates of Valhalla instead of the Rainbow Bridge, that felt much more in line with the cat that I knew: mighty in his ways and not timid in showing up where he wanted to go. The image of him that came from that idea was something that soothed me and made me laugh. Each person could have their own experience if they're open to finding what fits them as opposed to the traditional Rainbow Bridge.

When those mourning are approached about their loved ones, people often talk about an afterlife without any regard or interest in what the grieving person believes. This might feel incredibly disorientating for someone after loss. It is important for chaplains to get the lay of the land, so to speak. Staying in Not Knowing, asking questions, and getting to know the person (and the pet) in front of you is important when we find ourselves with someone who has lost or is losing an animal companion. No assumptions need be made about what that person believes for the afterlife of their pet. Instead, we can be open to asking the question, hearing the answering, and moving on with the knowledge.

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Bearing Witness in animal chaplaincy can especially apply to something as difficult as euthanasia. The importance of “bearing witness, letting go, bearing witness, and letting go” as Glassman shares is important in a highly emotional topic and experience like euthanasia. Our own judgments must be left at the door and we must be with what is in front of us as openly as possible. Perhaps the person before you is considering euthanasia or has already made a choice, either way they may just need to have their feelings, questions, and doubts heard in a safe space. By taking steps to show that we are actively listening and understanding what the person is sharing, we can make clear that we are truly present for them and the situation.

From an animal chaplaincy perspective, Taking Action may simply be to stay in Not Knowing and Bearing Witness. As there are so many grieving their pets who are met with anything but compassion, sometimes the most impactful thing that a person can do is simply to stay in the first two Tenets. If there is some other action to take, it is important to check in with the person and allow them to guide what is best for them.

Case Study

This case study format is adapted from a clinical pastoral education verbatim. Liberties were taken with the format to best convey the encounter and to give the ability to summarize in a way that brought suggested applications of the Three Tenets into view.

To begin my work on this project, I had put the call out via social media for those experiencing loss or hospice with their pets. The case study participant reached out to me and was made aware that our interactions would be used in this project. She gave explicit consent to do so.

Background Information

J is a woman in her 40s. She originally had two male dogs, F and L. Both dogs were under

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the age of 10 and the same breed, Bernese Mountain Dogs. F was the younger of the two at approximately five years old. F had died three months prior to our meeting and L had received a poor prognosis around the same time. Our initial meeting took place in a park in September of 2022. The location was chosen so that L could join us.

Preliminary Observations

J and L were sitting on a grassy hill under a row of trees. As I approached, J had her back turned toward me and L was facing me. It was a warm day and he was panting, but seemed otherwise not uncomfortable. He was eager to be greeted and accepted the treats I had brought with enthusiasm. Aside from his breathing, one might not know that he was ill. J spent significant time making sure that L was comfortable and settled before we began our talk.

Summary of Pastoral Conversations

J shared with me the circumstances of F's passing, which came on suddenly and without any known underlying conditions. She was clearly pained by the unanswered questions regarding his death. Prior to that day, she felt she sensed something was wrong with him and had taken him to the vet for an exam. There was nothing unusual in the findings at the vet's office, so J chalked her feelings up to something like paranoia. Now, she seemed to regret that she had not been more assertive in having F further examined. I took time to offer her assurance that she did all that she could have with the information (or lack thereof) that she had been given. I recognized that this is easier said than accepted. While J knew that she had done what she could, the what-ifs kept her questioning and we recognized that there is no time limit for those questions to ease.

After F's death, she took L to the vet as well for a checkup. This seemed to be partially in

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response to the mystery of F's death. After an extensive diagnostic workup, the veterinarian found a mass in L's chest. Operating was not an option and so care to keep L comfortable was chosen while it was possible to do so.

J spoke openly about her doubts in the care she offered to her dogs. She had a busy and full schedule and worried that she didn't do enough. After F's death and L's prognosis, she had decided that L would only have good food and fun for the remainder of his days. She took L camping, fed him his favorite foods, and otherwise planned to spend the last months of his life doing everything that he seemed to enjoy. Her ability to take care of him in this way seemed to bring her some comfort in her doubts. I attempted to assure her that her care for the dogs was not in question and that if she felt she could, she should rest easy on that.

We got up and walked with L for a short while. J told me about how her sons were handling the loss of F and impending loss of L. We discussed grief for what had been lost and a kind of pre-emptive grief that she was experiencing for L. Mourning for an impending loss was not something that J seemed to have experienced before and she expressed awkwardness at feeling it. She shared that she cried often in quiet moments with L. I tried to assure her that it was not something unusual, but a part of the grief process.

Our encounter was approximately an hour. During that time, I thought often about what I would have wanted if I had been in this scenario on the other side of things. I talked a bit about my experience with Thor and I believe that helped to set up a trust between J and I around the topic of grief and pets. When we parted, I spent time petting L and offering more treats. We spoke about finding another time to meet in the near future as J expressed that talking about things felt helpful to her.

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Reflection

J was my first “official” encounter with a person in the space of animal chaplaincy. We did not speak explicitly of the spiritual, though we did talk about F in a way that could be understood as about his spirit, what he might have wanted to share with her had he been able to speak. This seemed to be helpful to J. The finality of F’s death may have been soothed by the consideration of what may have come after. Perhaps it felt like almost a possibility for him to continue in some way for her in spirit.

J would later share with me that our time together felt “valuable and safe.” To me, this highlights the importance of a space to simply grieve and to talk through the loss. Holding the space for someone like J can bring the loss into a different perspective, one that perhaps allows for healing in a way.

For most of the conversation, things seemed to move naturally. I tried to come from a space of Not Knowing and Bearing Witness. These were concepts I returned to continuously, reminding myself of them to stay connected to the moment and what J may have needed. The conversation was allowed to flow with the topics driven by J’s need to discuss them. I worked to stay open and ask questions as well as stay in a place of non-judgment. The doubts and questions that J had did not need me to make any commentary about them, but instead maybe simply needed to be said aloud and heard. The Compassionate Action that I kept coming back to was simply being present and listening. There was nothing for me to explicitly *do* in terms of an action to impact the situation.

I’m not sure that I would have done much differently in terms of our first encounter. I can recognize that there was some discomfort on my own part due to it being my first time speaking with someone in this capacity. There may have been moments of awkwardness or times where a

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better question could have been asked, a more thoughtful comment given. I believe that some of that comes from experience. Returning again to Not Knowing was helpful in those moments of inexperience. We can never know exactly how things feel for the person in front of us, including our own part in the interaction. Having compassion for myself in those moments of uncertainty and being open to what unfolded also helped. If I had spent time critiquing everything I said or did, I wouldn't have been able to be present for J, which was the most important thing. I was able to be with J to the best of my ability in the moment and that seems like something that was helpful for her.

Conclusion and Next Steps

I think it's important to note that the original intention of this paper was to form small groups for those experiencing pet loss or going through a time of hospice or otherwise intense animal care periods (see Appendix B). What I discovered in this process is that while every veterinary professional and pet owner that I spoke with seemed to believe that this resource was an important one and agreed that it was not as easily accessed by many, it was found to be much more difficult than expected to form these groups. I believe part of this is because we are used to hearing about grief groups for those grieving humans, but not for animals. The Ohio State University, home to an extensive veterinary hospital, emergency room, and veterinary school, has for the last few years only had one veterinary social worker. While I do not have numbers for this facility's pet deaths or hospice cases, it should be expected that they are much higher than the smaller hospital mentioned previously in this paper. There would be no logical way for one person to be a big enough resource for the number of pet owners coming in and out of the hospital and ER. When this is the case, are we not shown that this grief and perhaps even the full experience of pet ownership is somehow not a priority, even in a veterinary hospital.

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The truth of the matter is that when we disenfranchise animal grief, we make it harder for people to access the resources or to even be open to what is available. If a person's grief feels outside of what they've been told is the "norm" for animal loss, they might feel like they cannot reach out. Thus, in some ways, the lack of resources is perpetuated. When friends have learned that I am interested in this work, I have had many stories of my information being shared with those who have lost pets and I have not had one reach out from those stories. It would be presumptuous to assume that everyone who received my information needed the work of a chaplain, but I also believe it's possible that so little of this resource is available that people shy away from it.

Making more resources available to pet owners can make an impact on some of the hardest times of pet ownership. Animal chaplains can be a key part of these resources. I believe those who wish to go into this work would benefit from the framework of the Three Tenets. Being able to approach each interaction with Not Knowing allows chaplains to be open to the individual experience of each person. The spirit of Bearing Witness can help chaplains to be fully present. Recognizing the next Compassionate Action – even if it is stay in Not Knowing and Bearing Witness – can be another way of helping those in grief.

I would be remiss in this paper not to recognize the deep grief and heartache that comes with work in the veterinary profession itself. Animal suffering and loss does not only effect the owners, but all who care for the animal. According to a 2019 study by the Centers for Disease control, "veterinarians are between two to four times more likely to die by suicide than the general population" (Spidel, 2023). The stress and "compassion fatigue" that many professionals in this field face is something that doesn't seem as well supported as it could be given the statistics. While this paper does not address this aspect of animal chaplaincy, I want to recognize

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that this work is also important and very necessary. I believe that the same framework of the Three Tenets could be used in working with veterinary professionals to help ease their suffering as well. It is something that I hope to explore further in my own work and I encourage other chaplains to do the same.

There is no doubt that animals are a special part of our lives and that our grief in times of loss, hospice, and other instances deserves care. Chaplains are uniquely suited to this work and can make an impact on those touched by these situations. It is my hope that this paper can inspire more chaplains to take up this work for the animals and their people in a way that honors how very special they are.

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Appendix A: The Rainbow Bridge

The Rainbow Bridge

Just this side of heaven is a place called
Rainbow Bridge. When an animal dies that
has been especially close to someone here,
that pet goes to 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, 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 content,
except for one small thing: they each 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. His bright eyes are
intent; his eager body quivers. Suddenly he

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begins to run 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 Rainbow Bridge together....

— Anonymous

Version taken from *When Only the Love Remains*

Appendix B: Small Groups**Small Group Concept**

The following format can be used with the intention of forming small peer groups to offer support for those experiencing pet loss or hospice. These groups would be made up of 5-7 people who have been identified as dealing with similar circumstances such as pet hospice or loss. Each person in the group might first have a one-on-one conversation with the facilitator to better understand their situation and learn how to steer the group discussion. If groups meet for a certain period (example: 4 weeks), an exit interview of sorts might be offered to participants to understand how they benefited or didn't. This information could be used to improve facilitation in the future as well as open the discussion for more individual care if needed.

Initial Small Group Questions

- What brought you to the group?
- How long has it been since you lost your companion?
- Please share a little bit about what your grief journey has been like so far.
- How would you rate your emotional distress on a scale of 1 (not at all distressed) to 10 (extremely distressed)?
- Have you taken part in any other small groups, therapy, or other methods of working with your grief? If so, how was the experience?

Completed Small Group Questions

- How would you rate your emotional distress on a scale of 1 (not at all distressed) to 10

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(extremely distressed)?

- How has being part of the small group impacted your grieving process?
- What was most beneficial to you during the group? Least?