

Good-bye Mr. B.

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

He was a thirteen-year old, one hundred pound, ill behaved mongrel. He had paws like saucers, a coffee-table height tail, and as much torque as a pony. He didn't like to "heel". Ask, "would you like a bath, Barkley?", and he would lay down like a protester in front of a tank, refusing to be moved. He once walked a picket line with a sign that said, "Dogs for fair play". He loved to swim, run, chew sticks, and sleep. He liked his kibbles crunchy and his balls bouncy. He threw himself into river currents and ocean waves without hesitation. He sometimes hung out at the office, a benign presence and live lesson in stress management. He wasn't always a good dog ("Bad dog" was his middle name), but he sure knew how to have a good time, and he threw himself into play like there was no tomorrow; just this one, fabulous, delicious day to be savored.

A few months ago we wrote about the lessons that animals teach. A few weeks ago, we experienced another of those lessons. Barkley had been sick, and we tried to help him get better. But on a Sunday afternoon, he gave Serena a pained look from his bed that seemed to say, "it's time. Please help me to stop hurting; help me to die."

It was hard. One evening soon after, we took him out to Merville, to a place where we all loved to play. Under a full moon, he rallied to chase a rabbit for a few paces, then sat and savored the smells and the lovely night air. We humans took turns digging the hole where we would return, the next day, to place his body. In the morning, we gently helped him into the car for his last car ride, then sang to him and told stories while Dr. Ken got ready to help. As Dr. Ken gave him the injections, Serena held Barkley's big head, which got heavier and heavier, relaxing into sleep and then death.

As we write this, it has been two weeks since we buried our pal, and each of us has had hours when the tears rolled, unchecked, down our cheeks. Some days we feel sick, and some days we want to fill the empty space with chocolate brownies (Serena) or pizza and

chocolate (Monika). Serena has been misplacing keys, sweaters, coffee cups, and her glasses even more often than usual. Monika lost and found her purse more than once, and continues to double-check her schedule every evening, having discovered several double bookings just in time. At times, we feel proud of the gentle and caring job that we did to help Barkley in those last days, and relieved that his passing was an easy one after a long (for a dog) and happy (for any being) life. Other times, we feel devastated, or just inconsolably grumpy. Energy is low. The house is messy. Tessa, the other dog in the household, is grieving. She didn't eat for days, and looked mournfully at his empty bed (until she appropriated it as her own). Say his name, and her ears prick up, looking around, smelling around for him. This is what grief looks like; this is what grief feels like.

Some readers may be thinking, "but it was just a dog". Others might think, "oh yeah, I know just what they are talking about." Serena, herself, tends go back and forth, asking, "am I making too much of this?", and then, coming back to her more sensible self, accepting that grief is a normal process that no amount of denial is going to sweep away. In some ways, it is like the flu. You cut back on expectations, try to take good care of your body and soul, and ride it out. The only way out of it is through it, and there isn't much of a roadmap to tell you how long it will take or what the journey is going to look like. Even if one has grieved before, each loss is different. One may leave you contemplative and introspective, another retching with physical pain, and yet another alternating between relief that a hard task is over, and an emptiness that can't be filled.

Losing a pet is different in some ways than other kinds of loss. First, there is the uncomplicated, unconditional love that a pet gives. Barkley never got his feelings hurt just because we chose the wrong words to explain something (it was "blah, blah, walkies! Blah, blah, I love you, Barkley. Blah blah, hungry?"



to him). He didn't wonder whether he was still attractive or getting fat, and he didn't look at us that way, either. If we spoke harshly, he went under the table, but he was quick to forgive and make up. That kind of simple acceptance, that comes without conditions, and doesn't even rely upon understanding, comes only from pets.

Second, there is the pet's utter dependence upon us. If the pet is in pain, or confused, or unhappy, it can't solve its problems itself. And if we can't fix what is wrong, the pet still looks at us, asking for help, trusting that we know best. Decisions about helping an animal to die are terribly difficult, but the choice often lies in our very human hands. Ambivalence and guilt may haunt us. Even harder is when a pet is lost, and we don't know how or where it died. When possible, it is up to us, their human friends, to make the arrangements for a gentle death, to decide what to do with the remains, and to try to mark their memory in a fitting way.

Third, we must grieve our pets while life goes on. Children have to be told and comforted, and helped to grieve in their own way. Some colleagues and friends may, but many probably won't grasp the depth of our loss or make allowances and give condolences. We may feel apologetic or embarrassed about grieving a pet, guilty about making a fuss and at the same time perhaps guilty about not making enough of a fuss. Without community rituals and shared understandings of how to mark a pet's loss, we are on our own, making up rituals and comfort as we go.

Sometimes when we grieve a pet we are grieving for more than the pet. Other losses can come back to us full strength. Losing Barkley brought back to Monika the loss of her own beloved dog, Arrow. And Serena, remembering all of her years with Barkley, was drawn back to some of the hard times that he saw her through. She missed the little girl, now an adult, who picked out the puppy with the big paws. She remembered the comforting snore at the foot of her bed, as she got used to being a single mother and learned not to be afraid of being alone in the dark.

In the end, we remember once again that it is important to love. It is not required that the loved one be large, good looking, noble, or even human. A one-eyed, ornery, happy mongrel will do nicely. And when he is gone, so is the reassuring snore, the soft, soft muzzle to stroke, the big, protective-sounding bark, the sympathetic face, the absolutely delirious greeting every day after work, the most forgiving and patient and straight-forward friend Serena had.

So, Good-bye, Mr. B. Good-bye, Barkley "Bad Dog" Patterberg. Thanks for everything. We hope that you are happy and pain free, romping around somewhere.

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