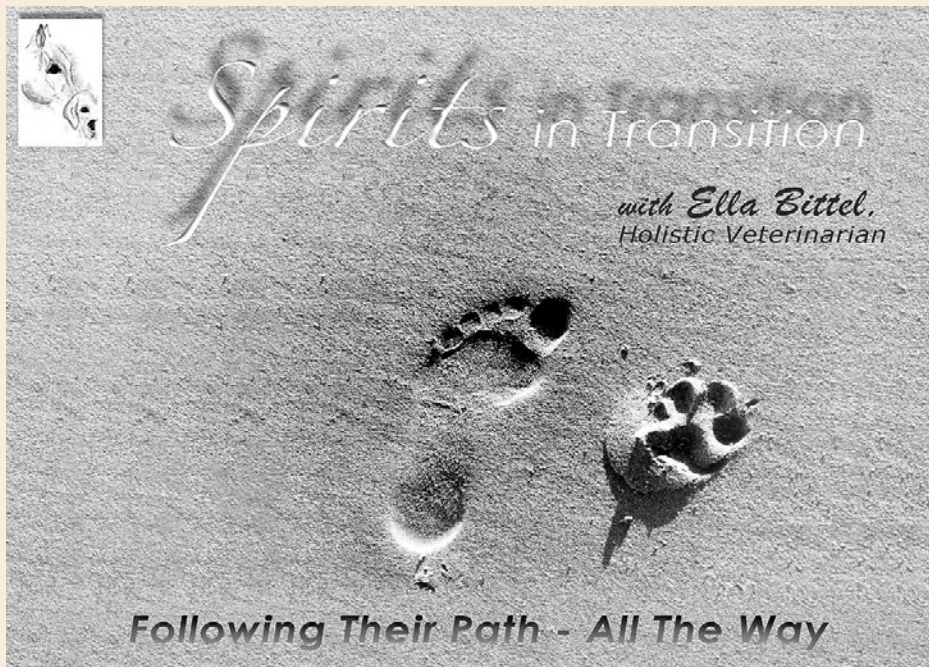


# Quality of Life ~

# Quality of Death

By Ella Bittel



There is no doubt left even if there weren't studies to prove it: Our animal companions have loved their way into our families and few caretakers shy away anymore from admitting their pawed ones are their kids. We share our beds and dishes, pick the pet food with an ingredient list that reads most like the shopping list of a gourmet chef, and the pillow on our otherwise inviting looking grandfather chair warns uninitiated visitors: "If you don't like dog hair, don't sit down."

We drop Boomer off at doggie day care on our way to work, take him to doggie school in the afternoon and to the hairdresser alias groomer on the weekend. We are passed feeling embarrassed by being told we are anthropomorphizing; rather, we move on to having compassion for the accuser because he must never have felt the inescapably endearing and uplifting presence of a fur ball of love, nor met the eye of a four-legged or winged spirit connecting us with the source of our own being.

And, as we would with our human child, we don't hesitate when a health crisis arises. We take our beloved for more and more sophisticated medical care and go out of our way to restore its health and happiness.

But when it becomes clear that recovery is no longer achievable, many

When it was Momo's time to get ready to depart, it became clear to Ella that none of her traditional nor holistic veterinary training had prepared her for how to support a dying animal. The picture was taken one day before Momo's natural passing, marking the beginning of Ella's commitment to learn about and help further animal hospice.





Providing hospice to an animal can require a lot of time and strength, and finding support can be essential. Here Ella has joined Karen in watching over Fudge.

caretakers suddenly find a gap the size of an abyss between how to treat an animal and how to treat a human family member. Even if legislation would allow it, not so easily would we take advice from a doctor telling us our baby son, no longer eating, with his body in the firm grip of terminal disease, should kindly be given a final injection. Even with the most heartfelt desire to relieve her suffering we would not quickly, if ever, jump to ending the life of our three-year-old daughter fighting cancer because she has more bad days than good days.

We may call for the freedom to be permitted to also end a human's suffering when death seems unavoidable. But let's face it, when given that liberty we choose it only in rare exceptions. For ten years now the Death with Dignity Act has made taking a lethal dose of drugs available to terminally ill Oregon residents. The result of a decade of choice over dying quickly rather than slowly? Only one in ten thousand actually took those pills.

Wishes regarding assisted death usually expressed by physically quite capable and independently living individuals frequently change once the person reaches the previously

anticipated "limit of tolerance." This is no secret among hospice workers.

In the light of all that, do we really believe our animals' desire to live, even when under compromised circumstances, is so much less than our own that it justifies the standard practice today of euthanizing them? Yes, just as it can be comforting for Oregon residents to feel they have the power in their own hands over possibly ending their lives, it is a great relief to know we have euthanasia available if all our attempts fail to maintain the comfort of an animal at an acceptable level. Talking about acceptable: acceptable by whom?



By us, the caregivers? Our life partners, roommates, the veterinarian maybe? Are we sure that our human perceptions would match what an animal may find an acceptable level of discomfort?

The sentence "I knew this animal wanted to die as he always loved his food and he stopped eating" has been spoken many times, like echoes of a mantra. Yet it can fail to soothe a nagging sensation deep inside. We tend to go right "back to work" after making what we have been assured to be the "right choice," but we might have to hold still to be able to trace the doubts still rumoring under almost subconscious cover. Was it really the right choice at the right time?

Not that there would be any benefit to feeling guilty or regretting a now irreversible decision, but for the sake of informing possible future choices

Saying goodbye may not be easy, but embracing the dying process in its fullness also prepares our heart to say to our loved one, "I will be all right. You are free to go whenever the time is right for you."



Momo's kiss

Photo by  
Sibylle Centgraf

we could dare taking a look at just this one example.


Maybe we were just unfamiliar with what dying looks like when it happens in its own good time? Maybe we were just unaware of the fact well known in human hospice that the body may no longer desire food when it is in the process of wrapping up its business? This usually does not pose a discomfort to the one dying, yet nonetheless consistently upsets those relatives who do not know what is involved with that process: they commonly confuse the possible loss of interest in food with starving. A dying body simply has no use for fuel for a future that will not happen. Yet this does not equal the ceasing of will of the dying to still experience all that is happening.

Does it matter? How precious can they be, those last days when let's say they are only spent lying down, requiring regular turning to avoid bed sores, and urine pad changes by the one who has received so much joy from the four-legged loved one's company throughout its

exuberant younger years? Why, instead of simply ending such situation, make the time to offer small bites of food if still of interest, or sips of water, loving touch and words of assurance and affection?

If we feel the love for our animal to be so similar to the one for a child, what is it that compels us to care for a dying human one without questioning? Is it just part of our genetics, or maybe

a vague sense that the value of life is not linear and defies being measured in abilities a being has, never had or does no longer have? If death is not the end to an individual's existence, might dying be like another birthing process in which we arrange ourselves with some labor involved?

It is human to be afraid of death, especially the one of our loved ones. Yet that very love connecting us to our human and animal children forms the core of our ability to question preconceived notions about dying and suffering, to inquire ahead of time how we can prepare for not only facing, but embracing the last season of life and the ultimate challenge it can be to support our loved ones throughout the time of farewell. We may just find that supporting a dying animal gifts us with the opportunity to prepare for fully being there, also for a dying human and for our own inevitable departure whenever it may come. 



*Specializing in holistic treatment options for animals for over 20 years, Ella Bittel is a German veterinarian who lives and works in Santa Ynez Valley, California. Her special passion is hospice care for animals, which led her to create the weekend seminar "SPIRITS in Transition", for people interested in providing end-of-life care for their animal loved one. Visit [www.spiritsintransition.org](http://www.spiritsintransition.org), or contact Ella at [spiritsintransition@verizon.net](mailto:spiritsintransition@verizon.net).*