

Will you know when its time? The other side of the coin

By Marne Burke

I was a late starter in pet ownership. After years of dragging home every stray ("s/he followed me home, can I keep her?") I was allowed my first pet, a cat, when I was nine but was denied a dog until I was seventeen. Maybe as a result, I'm never satisfied with just one or two; I crave a crowd. I have more pets right now than many people have in a lifetime. Yet in all the years I've owned pets or helped others make the last decision, I don't think I've ever had a single animal tell me it was time. Not, at least, where the message was separate from pain. Sure, many have told me they were hurting, but none ever seemed resigned unless their poor bodies were just worn out. For me, there has never been a mystical communication, just a realization that there really was no hope. Maybe I just don't have the gift; am not empathetic enough. Maybe I've chosen to end their lives before they're so ill that they wanted only release. But I want to warn the inexperienced that if they're waiting for a "touched by an angel" moment, it may not come. In fact, you may be overlooking the writing on the wall.

Pain is the strongest message I know, and I can only bear it for my pets if there is more than just a chance of survival, but a real possibility of a return to a quality life. I've kept pets alive whose physical frailties were a burden on me but I will not burden them with pain for my sake. I believe it's my job to ensure not just my pets' survival but their comfort. When there is no hope of recovery, then there are only risks of catastrophic end-struggles.

Euthanasia is the final gift we can give, but in my experience (and that of the vets I've spoken to) it is all too often denied or at least delayed so long that the results are unwarranted suffering for the beloved. I can tell tales of endless suffering by pets whose owners were so strongly in denial that they could not see what was apparent to everyone around them. Of dogs screaming during the last ride to the vet; or of dying alone with evidence of great suffering.

One of the most painful memories I carry is of my yorkie, Sister's, last minutes. Despite disabilities her last years were active and upbeat. She'd been mostly deaf and virtually blind for years. Her little heart sounded like an unbalanced washing machine, but she was comfortable and feisty, enjoyed outings and kept command of the pack. But then there were signs of renal failure and I knew her time was very short. I thought kidney failure would be a relatively peaceful ending; at worst a slipping into coma. I'd planned for the parting on the weekend so I'd be less likely to break down at work.. But I woke Wednesday

morning and knew she was too sick to wait. Not because she told me, but because I'd have to have been blind not to finally see how sick she was. Driving to the vet, she seized in my lap. And seized. And seized. It remains the longest 17 minutes of my life, more painful than my own broken bones or strangulated intestine. She should not have had to experience that. I knew her time was short; I should not have waited.

I swore, and now counsel others, to learn everything there is to know about the medical problem that puts the pet at risk. I seek other medical opinions and procedures only if there is a real possibility of a successful restoration to health. I insist that my vet give me the fullest possible prognosis, including what crises (stroke, seizure, etc.) are associated with the terminal phase of my pet's condition. I was surprised to learn just how rare a peaceful "slipping away" really is and how often death is a jolting, painful event or preceded with endless pain. I will no longer wait until a crisis is at hand. Armed with the information of all the risks, I try to time it to the minute, but if I err, I pray that it be on the side of too early.

There is no good time to kill someone you love. But given a choice between too soon, thus missing some good times and too late, when my pet suffers – or another person must make that most painful choice in my absence - I would always go with the decision that caused *me* greater pain, rather than my loved one.

Only the owner can make the decision. Sometimes we have months to think things over and sometimes tragedy strikes and every minute is unbearable for your pet. Each of us should think this through well in advance of the need. What is it we most want for ourselves? For our pets? If you are delaying, ask yourself what you're waiting for. If it's for a crisis that will make the choice easier for you, consider not waiting. Assume the heavier burden, and make it easier on your dog.

*In honor or memoriam of: Spooky Portia Gyp Tara Jenny Mavorneen
DeidreHeather Duffey Paix & Solange Paddington-Bear Slircle Chutty Leia
Phoebe-Demeter Geordie Sister Moby-Tom Munchkin Sc huylar Petronius-
the-Arbiter Virgil-Nikes Jean- Clawed-Montana Sydney-Sarah Rufus Beertje
Emma Dakin Billybub Pinocchio Dutch Girl Zwarte-Piet Atticus-Finch et
al.*