

Not Just Pets

March 22nd, 2019

Having lived in an environment where animals have always been present, there was almost no chance I wouldn't become one of those people that love them and see them as family. As far back as I can remember, my family and I have had pets. Many dogs and cats have come and gone in my lifetime. In almost every case, a strong bond has been formed. Tons of people have pets. However, not everyone forms those strong bonds that lead to great memories and ultimately, those final days where you grieve similarly to the loss of a person.

It's a situation where ninety-nine percent of the time, it's a blessing to have them around. Just like you do with a person, you create those memories that stick with you for the rest of your life. The sad truth is going into getting a pet, you understand that your time with them is limited. For better or worse, I developed that ability to quickly become very attached to animals. Each individual probably has their own reasons as to how or why they form close attachments to animals. For me personally, I think it partially has to do with what I see reflected in my own personality. When someone has shown kindness and respect towards me, I feel a fierce loyalty to that person. That same trait is often present in cats and dogs that I've known. Once I show them that kindness, that bond is solidified and they show me that loyalty back.

Of the many pets we've had, that bond has never been stronger than in our cat Squeaker (2005-2018). She was one of those beautiful cats that looked like she came straight out of a pet calendar. Almost from the start, we became inseparable. If I was home, she would find me and sleep on my lap if possible. If I was working on something important or if she wasn't able to get on my lap, she would usually sit as close as possible to me and wait me out. Sooner or later, she might even push her way onto my lap and completely shut down the task I was working on out of sheer impatience. One particular memory that always made me laugh happened when I was away from home for a particular length of time each week. During my final semester in college, my Tuesdays were long days. I left around 8:00 AM and would finally get home around 8:30 or 9:00 PM. Sometimes, instead of jumping on my lap as soon as I got home, she would purposely avoid me (for a little while) just to show me how much

she didn't appreciate what I did. However, on those Tuesday nights, she would inevitably end up sleeping on my lap at some point.

Whether it was this, memories of her tossing toys four or five feet sky-high, or her busting into my bedroom when I was still in bed and laying next to my head on my pillow, I have so many ways in which I can happily remember my thirteen years with her. Last year, the elephant in the room became how we all noticed that Squeaker was losing weight. Her once beautiful fur was losing a little bit of its luster at this same time. The final alarming sign came when I could tell her breathing wasn't the same as it once was. Watching her, it just looked like she had to work harder to take in every breath. My mom decided we needed to take her to the vet. The final day of Squeaker's life is still tattooed in my mind, and I can recall just about every single detail of that whole day. It was absolutely miserable.

On that summer day, the final morning we had together, she slept on my lap as peacefully as she could at this point. I knew that I was going to go with my mom to take her to the vet. Without coming out and saying it, I was afraid that she wouldn't be coming home alive. This was reflected in the fact that when we got in the car and left, I was able to hold it together for about three minutes before I started crying. There haven't been many occasions where I've cried, but that day certainly showed the bond I felt with this animal. The vet came in and checked Squeaker out, and he could tell that something wasn't one hundred percent alright with her lungs. Of course, the decision was ultimately ours. She had been fighting long enough. It was time for her to be at peace. The doc gave her the shot that would slow and stop her heart in a few minute's time. I sat in a room and held her in my arms as she took in her final labored breaths. Never in my life have I had less control over my emotions. Tears were streaming down my face.

As terrible as the experience was, I knew I had to be there. She showed me undying loyalty and love that some people could never understand. All she ever seemed to want was to be close to me. In the months leading up to her final trip to the vet, she actually became more possessive and aggressive in seeking out my lap. In a way, our bond became that little bit stronger as her health was fading away. She is the textbook reason why if someone were to say to me "they're just animals," I would probably shake my head and tell them that they just don't get it.

So for any pet lovers out there, we all know that despite how hard it is to say goodbye to them, there's never any regrets in having pets. We know the spaces left behind that have memories tied up and forever linked to those family members that we can't directly speak to. We know how much we enjoy being around them and how they can impact our lives and bring a calming influence when we've had a tough day. We understand that like people, every individual animal has its own personality. We get to know them like we get to know a friend. I fully believe that pets are capable of bringing out the best qualities in people. And when we have to lose one of them, the grieving isn't any easier because they're an animal. Despite the hurt I felt on the most miserable day of my life to this point, it never once made me question the decision to continue having pets in the future. I guess that's what it means to love animals.