

Having a pet in the family rounds things out. That's not to say "pet-less" families are asymmetrical or deformed in any way. It's just that having a dog or cat around brings out an aspect of a person or a family that is otherwise hidden, hibernating in folks' character. There is a love and a great friendship that blossoms between man and beast in a way that isn't really evidenced in love shared with another human being. It can be more trusting, less risky. I don't admire people that treat their animals better than their next-door neighbor but I am affected by the quiet companionship between a devoted canine and a loving master.



Recently, my niece Natalie, my friend Joe and my sister Stacie all lost a beloved pet. Natalie lost her guinea pig Oreo, Joe lost Buggy, his bichon frise and Stacie lost Brittany, a Brittany spaniel, their first family dog.

Oreo was a longhaired rodent with black and white fur, hence the name Oreo. I don't remember if it was a he or a she. I actually liked Oreo and had gotten brave enough to stick my finger in her cage and stroke her head. When I babysat my brother's kids, I'd always stop by Natalie's bedroom and feed Oreo a couple of pieces of grass and make sure her water bottle was full. She'd respond to my appearance with a couple of squeaky noises or make a dash for her blue plastic igloo house and hide. I believe we formed a friendly bond if nowhere else than in my imagination and I'll miss seeing her.

Natalie didn't call me when Oreo passed away. Maybe that's because I used to rib her about taking care of her furry friend or just because life moves on with or without guinea pigs and my knowing wasn't of any great consequence. When my brother told me about Oreo's passing, I sent Natalie a card with a picture of St. Agnes, patron saint of young girls. Agnes, a blond teenager, is holding a little white lamb in her arms and that's how I see Natalie, sweet, young and kind to living things. I bet her room is just a tad emptier and the smell of green hay will pass, replaced by the aromas of teenage perfumes and hair care products. Natalie still has two yellow labs in her family. Four-legged friendships still abound in her home.

In a recent column, I mentioned a friend of mine from church. Joe Flanagan, whose plate is full with his recent diagnosis of esophageal cancer, had to put his longtime companion Buggy down. Buggy was a fluffy white canine and fifteen-year companion to Joe. Joe told me he has reached for Buggy on occasion only to find he is not there and my heart breaks when I listen to his story. Joe shared a letter with me he received from a Dataw neighbor. She wrote Joe a poem entitled "Ode to Buggy." In her sonnet, she immortalizes the bond between the pup and his pal and she cheers him on in his fight against "the Big C." Joe's little buddy brought out the best in him and in his neighbor.

My sister Stacie's loss was the toughest for me to take because I don't like hearing her cry over the phone. You can't give hugs through satellite transmissions. Brittany was Stacie's friend and companion for fifteen years and I think Brittany's constant devotion complimented my sister's nurturing nature. Brittany was at my sister's side as she raised her children and earned her degree as a physician's assistant. I know Brittany was a comfort during the times Stacie was away from my dad as he declined. She has another spaniel and her daughter Lea adopted

a little black poodle named Buddy who needed a home when his master passed away, so the house is still crazy. But the hole is there. As Joe's friend told him in her poem, "no one's prepared when our dogs grow old."

In my family, my husband and I have become the adopted parents of Cokie – meaning she has adopted us – but my mom is master and loving owner of the bichon. Cokie has been in our family for a little over ten years, replacing my dad's beloved beagle Pharaoh and becoming my mom's constant companion through her years as caretaker to my father. Cokie has been at her side during times of poor health. She rode in the back seat of my mother's Honda in the move to South Carolina from Pennsylvania and has been a stowaway under airplane seats in a doggie carry-on. I have been Cokie's chauffeur in rides to the Animal Medical Center, jaunts around Beaufort and Lady's Island and back and forth to my mother's house. I do not welcome the thought of Cokie's demise or the impact of losing her on my mom or on our family.

When Joe shared his friend's poem with me, he also gave me a little remembrance card from the Sea Island veterinary office with a verse called "The Rainbow Bridge." Inspired by a Norse legend, the rhyme offers an image of a person reuniting with a healthy, happy pet and the two companions crossing over a rainbow into eternity. If I'm blessed enough to be introduced to God and His Son by St. Peter, and reunited with my loved ones whose loss is at the core of my greatest sadness, I kind of like the idea of meeting up with Heidi. She was our family dog through my siblings and my teenage years. Crossing a rainbow into a wide-open field, running wildly, our youth and health restored, isn't a bad concept of heaven. Hell, I like it a whole lot better than a halo, harp and wings.