



George Dickinson, spring 2013

Tom, a tabby, rests at St. Mary Redcliffe Church in Bristol, England; parts of the Anglican house of worship date to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

# Household Pet Euthanasia and Companion Animal Last Rites

By George Dickinson

Statistics about pet ownership, illness, and death vary widely, but the onus to honor the beloved creatures upon their demise proves constant. Take literature. In ancient Greek poet Homer's *The Odyssey*, Argos the dog waited 20 years for wandering Odysseus to return, only to die upon recognizing its teary-eyed master. And Charles Dickens so adored Bob the cat that when it expired, the distraught Victorian writer had a paw stuffed, affixed to the top of an ivory blade, and transformed into a letter opener engraved to the kitty.<sup>1</sup> No wonder Hallmark introduced pet sympathy cards in 1984 because, as the corporate website explains, "there has been a growing consumer demand for cards offering condolences for the loss of a pet, reflecting the fact that Americans often view pets as members of the family."<sup>2</sup>

Estimates in recent years of companion animals owned in the U.S.: 69.9 million to 83.3 million dogs, 74 million to 95.6 million cats, 8.3 million to 20.6 million birds, and 4.85 million to 8.3 million horses, plus many speciality and exotic animals such as fish, reptiles, livestock, and rodents, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association, the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Humane Society, the American Pet Products Association, and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.<sup>3</sup> The objects of

affection populate significant portions of U.S. homes. Up to 56.7 million American households, or 47 percent, own dogs; up to 45.3 million, or 46 percent, own cats; up to 6.9 million, or 3.9 percent, own birds; and up to 2.8 million, or 1.8 percent, own horses.<sup>4</sup> The more, the merrier: the average number of pets per household of those with animals: 1.6 or 1.7 dogs, 2.1 or 2.2 cats, 2.3 or 2.5 birds, and 2.7 or 3.5 horses, compile the American Veterinary Medical Association and the U.S. Census Bureau, respectively.<sup>5</sup> For comparison, U.K. households totalled 8.5 million dogs and 8.5 million cats in 2013,<sup>6</sup> with dogs in 25 percent of homes and cats in 19 percent, and with most people owning one pet.<sup>7</sup>

It follows that equally large numbers of pets become fatally sick and otherwise perish each year. But no consensus emerges. "It is impossible to say how many companion animals die each year in the United States since no one keeps a registry, as we do for human deaths," stipulates bioethicist Jessica Pierce in her 2012 book, *The Last Walk*. "No data are available [either] for the numbers of dogs and cats euthanized each year in veterinary offices and homes."<sup>8</sup> Inversely, a 2004 article in the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* puts more than 9 million owned dogs and cats dying in the U.S. in 1996, 7.9 per 100 dogs and 8.3 per 100 cats.<sup>9</sup>

No matter how discrepant the figures, and no matter how the calamity occurs, that's a lot of ailment to confront and grieving to process, research documents. And my recent survey of Phi Kappa Phi members who euthanized a household pet reinforces these findings.

## Profound connections

The bond between pets and humans, a special status that began in the early 1800s when people first kept them for enjoyment and not just utility,<sup>10</sup> continues to strengthen. Dogs and cats in U.S. homes from the 1970s to 2012 skyrocketed from 67 million to 164 million cumulatively, tallies the Humane Society.<sup>11</sup> The American Pet Products Association reports that in 2013-14, 68 percent of U.S. households own a pet, a substantial increase from an already majority of 56 percent in 1988 in the first year of its survey, and pet industry expenditures in 2013 were \$55.72 billion versus \$17 billion in 1994.<sup>12</sup>

Demographics help explain the spike in pets and the anguish owners face when their animal suffers a terminal condition, compelling them to decide whether or not to put it down. John Homans, executive editor of *New York* magazine, writes in his 2012 book *What's a Dog For?* about the breakdown of social networks; people lead more isolated lives, have fewer children, and do not stay married long.<sup>13</sup> University of California,

Berkeley anthropologist Stanley Brandes, in a paper analyzing American pet cemetery grave-stones, points to the rise of single-family households, childless couples, delayed first marriages, extended life expectancies and, thus, more widows and widowers.<sup>14</sup> People want to feel needed, Brandes adds, and pets require nurturing. So pets fill human emptiness, and when they hurt, owners by extension do too.

Indeed, people turn their companion animals into “fictive kin” — an anthropologic term meaning not related by blood, marriage or adoption, but like kin, such as a godparent. The owner considers the pet a treasured member of the family, therefore deserving honor. As Cindy Wilson, professor of family medicine at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, and colleagues observe in an analysis of obituaries, “fictive kin can be applied to those human-animal relationships ... [and] perceived to be as valuable as if the pets are actual family members.”<sup>15</sup> In about 85 percent of cases, the pet is a “fully accepted family member, social partner or sibling,” experts assess in another study.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the American Veterinary Medical Association in 2011 found that 63.2 percent of pet owners claimed their companion animals as family members.<sup>17</sup> An extreme example: billionaire hotel magnate Leona Helmsley, who left \$12 million to Trouble, her cherished white Maltese, upon dying in 2007 at age 87. She disinherited her closest relatives in a decision to be overturned in court. Helmsley also requested that Trouble, when no longer, be buried with her and her husband in their mausoleum. This wish could not be granted, either (Trouble died a few years later at age 12 and was cremated, with the ashes privately retained); New York state law prohibits animal burials in human cemeteries.<sup>18</sup>

It's human nature to take appreciative stock of someone dying or recently departed; so, too, an owner's esteem for a pet magnifies as its life ends. Tending to the companion animal during this difficult juncture and then mourning it are in some ways more complicated than doing so for people because the definition of a pet is debatable: honorary human or animal chattel?<sup>19</sup> Some non-pet owners consider such concern and grief inappropriate. Pet owners, of course, disagree. This article, focusing on the euthanasia of household pets and the resulting lamentation, suggests that companion animals are honorary humans, not animal chattel. Who doesn't cry at the conclusion of *Old Yeller*, the 1956 children's novel by Fred Gipson or the 1957 film adaptation directed by Robert Stevenson? The titular dog, having protected a post-Civil War Texas family farm from danger several times, becomes infected with rabies after battling a wolf and must be shot.

### Shared burdens

When a household pet develops a late-stage chronic illness, untreatable pain, or other dire incapacity, the dilemma for the owner may not be if but when to terminate life. The owner relies on the veterinarian to advise the “right time” to euthanize — not too early, not too far-gone. A veterinarian euthanizes an animal about eight times per month in the U.S., according to studies from

1995 and 2011,<sup>20</sup> and five times per month in the U.K., according to my research there last year.<sup>21</sup>

Some pet owners struggle with ambivalence about euthanasia; others do not. One study indicated that “around 50 percent” feel guilty about settling on it.<sup>22</sup> After all, no matter the logical, even humane basis, the result is an intimate “killed.” What an awful thing to do to one so dear, the thinking goes. Those who make peace with the procedure apply the exact inverse logic. Pet owners who do get torn up over euthanasia often feel frustrated and inadequate and must realize that they have done everything within their means and that each decision derived from love.<sup>23</sup> Euthanasia compels pet owners to come to grips with what sociologists call the “caring-killing paradox,” writes bioethicist Pierce in *The Last Walk*.<sup>24</sup> Giving themselves permission to aid in a pet's death process allows owners to progress from culpability to courage, taking on the role of “empowered, enlightened and positive facilitator” of a comfortable, if ultimate, alternative to pain and suffering.<sup>25</sup>

The strain on veterinarians entails more than making the proper clinical recommendation. The veterinarian also has the “privilege” of helping decide life or death, remark veterinarians Moises H. Frid and Alberto T. Perea in a 2007 article in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*;<sup>26</sup> veterinarians must educate and sensitize owners about this delicate time. In such situations, comment veterinarians William Folger and Margie Scherk in a 2010 edition of the *Journal of Feline Medicine and Surgery*, “Veterinarians are in a prime position to acknowledge and honor the human-animal bond.”<sup>27</sup> Veterinarian Mary S. Stewart, in her 1999 book *Companion Animal Death*, urges peers to reassure owners about providing a wonderful life and considerate death.<sup>28</sup> Veterinarians, by sharing in the responsibility of euthanasia, assuage the pet owner's conscience. As Elisa Mazzaferro, who concentrates in emergency veterinary medicine at Cornell University Veterinary Specialists, puts it, “Euthanasia is a gift that you give an animal so he is no longer suffering, the gift of not getting worse. It's a selfless gift, often wrought with guilt, but I hope some people find peace knowing their animal is in a better place.”<sup>29</sup> These end-of-life discussions with owners perforce encompass another topic requiring tact: disposal of the remains (see below).<sup>30</sup>

Owners stay in the room during pet euthanasia much more often than not: 67 percent in the U.S., according to a study of 349 veterinarians,<sup>31</sup> and 86 percent in the U.K., in my 2013 study of 174 veterinarians.<sup>32</sup> Why? One explanation is to honor the pet. Humans gather around dying people out of love, caretaking, and respect; obituaries often mention that the decedent was “surrounded by family” at the moment of death. In fact, some obituaries list pets among the survivors, in a growing trend.<sup>33</sup> To show comfort, mercy, and veneration, pet owners also bear witness to the passing. They have veterinarians put household animals to sleep in language akin to the eternal repose of humans. For pet owners who wait outside during the procedure, seeing the animal die might be more than they can endure. There's another reason owners don't want to be in the room: to avoid upsetting the pet by revealing distress. Or

perhaps not to “lie” to the animal that everything will be OK. Absence for the final breath thus signals courtesy and mindfulness. No matter where pet owners choose to be during euthanasia, their motivation seems honorable.

### Farewell figures

Cremation is most often the form of final disposition for companion animals left with veterinary clinics after euthanasia: 63 percent in the U.S. and 88 percent in the U.K., my studies indicate.<sup>34</sup> These owners gave me several reasons. They don't have space to bury the pet themselves or it's illegal to do so. Cremation allows transport of ashes upon moving elsewhere, thus preventing leaving Fido or Whiskers behind in the yard. And, as will be discussed below, cremation costs less than burial in a pet cemetery.

Of the 33 percent of U.S. pet owners who wait outside during euthanasia or leave the premises entirely,<sup>35</sup> they're more likely to bury their companion animals in pet cemeteries. This ritual dates to the late Paleolithic period; evidence unearths humans and dogs buried together.<sup>36</sup> Pet cemeteries emerged in the U.S. in 1896 and in Great Britain in 1880.<sup>37</sup> As of 2009, there are more than 600 pet cemeteries operating in the U.S.<sup>38</sup> and, as of 2007, 25 in England and Wales.<sup>39</sup> To compare just one category of humans, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs National Cemetery Administration maintains 131 national cemeteries.<sup>40</sup>

### Price ranges

Just as data about pet ownership, illness, and death vary widely, so do the fees for pet euthanasia, cremation, and burial. Euthanasia costs \$50 to \$100 in a veterinary office and \$295 to \$400 at home.<sup>41</sup> Euthanasia plus aftercare (i.e., transportation of the body to a crematory and the ashes scattered or returned in an urn) costs \$400 to \$800, depending on size of the pet and region of the country.<sup>42</sup> The SPCA Serving Erie County, N.Y., for example, charges \$40 for euthanasia and general cremation and \$135 for euthanasia and a private cremation with a cedar urn for cats and dogs up to 20 pounds, \$50 and \$180 for dogs 21 pounds to 50 pounds, \$60 and \$210 for dogs 51 pounds to 90 pounds, and \$70 and \$265 for dogs 91 pounds to 120 pounds, respectively.<sup>43</sup> Another source summarizes cremation outlays as \$55 to \$100 for puppies, kittens and small animals like birds, rabbits and ferrets, \$100 to \$150 for cats and dogs up to 50 pounds, and \$150 to \$350 for dogs between 50 pounds and 120 pounds, with extra costs for urns, pickup, even watching the cremation.<sup>44</sup>

Caskets cost \$90 to \$145 and burial at a pet cemetery costs \$500 to \$730, generally speaking,<sup>45</sup> with burials of small animals of less than 20 pounds at the lower end and large animals of more than 100 pounds at the upper end.<sup>46</sup> The 10-acre Los Angeles Pet Memorial Park, in Calabasas, Calif., opened in 1928 “as the final resting place for animals of stars and the starring animals themselves, including MGM's lion and the dog from *Little Rascals*”<sup>47</sup> and Charlie Chaplin's cat and Humphrey Bogart's dog.<sup>48</sup> The site has interred at least 40,000<sup>49</sup> and maybe 45,000<sup>50</sup> companion animals. “There's a crematory, some

offices and a shop selling urns, headstones and coffins. The small staff connects griever to florists, priests and rabbis. Depending on the size of the plot and the quality of the casket, burial can cost \$600 to \$2,000.<sup>51</sup> Another source, explicating that lots are sold by size, not location, states that a lot for a 5- to 6-pound cat costs \$60 and a basic casket made of carbon fiber \$66, while burial of a 70-pound dog costs \$984, more if in an upscale casket. Amenities such as burial service and continuous maintenance are included. Granite headstones start at \$310.<sup>52</sup>

How do these allocations fit into a pet owner's budget? Yearly expenditures on food, supplies, medical care, and training average between \$580 and \$875 for dogs and \$670 for cats and up to \$200 for birds.<sup>53</sup> The American Pet Products Association estimates for 2013-14 \$621 for a veterinarian surgery and \$231 for a routine visit for a household dog and \$382 and \$193, respectively, for a household cat.<sup>54</sup> Household dogs receive 2.6 veterinary visits each year, cats 1.6, birds 0.3, and horses 1.9, at a cost of \$227 per dog, \$90 per cat, \$14 per bird, and \$133 per horse, records the American Veterinary Medical Association, referencing 2012 (mean) data.<sup>55</sup>

A typical human funeral in the U.S. costs \$8,000 to \$10,000.<sup>56</sup> A human cremation costs much less, even with corollary components.<sup>57</sup>

### Far-reaching implications

Although few companion animals end up in pet cemeteries, the very existence of these graveyards speaks volumes about attachment and honor. Adrian Franklin, a sociology professor at University of Tasmania, notes in his 1999 book *Animals and Modern Cultures* that such interment not only demonstrates devotion to the pets but also gives them a degree of sacredness not allotted to other beasts.<sup>58</sup>

Initial epitaphs in U.S. pet cemeteries were impersonal, e.g., "My pet." By the early 1900s, the name was included, sometimes with the age or year of birth and death. After World War II, inscriptions etched in species and human family ties, and memorial photographs appeared.<sup>59</sup> Since the 1980s, dogs, cats, and even birds have been bestowed with the surnames of their owners on gravestones, symbolically converting the animals into blood relatives.<sup>60</sup>

Some pet owners bury companion animals in the yard, though I cannot find data on how many. Legality fluctuates from locale to locale. In general, regulations mandate that graves be deep enough to protect humans and animals from disease. But these rules are often vague and enforcement is usually lax.<sup>61</sup> Personally burying one's pet honors the companion animal, proponents argue, because intimates, rather than strangers, prepare the body for the last journey and because often it stays close to home in perpetuity: the yard. John Grogan, author of the 2005 bestselling memoir *Marley and Me*, after kneeling in front of the 13-year-old titular Labrador retriever when the

veterinarian performed euthanasia, buried the family dog in the backyard.<sup>62</sup> Grogan then exhumed and reburied the remains after moving.<sup>63</sup>

### Society poll

Some Phi Kappa Phi members, plus staff and friends, who consented to pet euthanasia confirm much of the above. Last June, the Society's Monthly Mentions email included a hyperlink to a germane survey that I created with Editor Peter Szatmary. There were 569 completed responses; 57 started but didn't finish. Eighty-four percent of respondents were female, at an average age of 33.96 years (median age = 37.1; range = 19-77 years).

The main reasons cited for pet euthanasia were cancer, renal failure, stroke, crippling arthritis combined with other frailties, and general debilitation. "He was suffering from kidney disease, intestinal disease, [was] deaf, dehydrated, [had] arthritis, a bone spur on his hip. We decided his quality of life was beginning to suffer too much," one respondent explained, for regular intravenous fluids to keep him alive. Another pet owner called euthanasia "the toughest decision I have ever had to make in my life, and I constantly think there was something [else] I could have or should have done," buttressing the earlier reference to ambivalence about the procedure.

Eighty-two percent of respondents asked their veterinarian whether euthanasia was the right

thing to do, and 98 percent agreed that the veterinarian made the proper recommendation, which was euthanasia 80 percent of the time. Euthanasia occurred at the clinic 90 percent of the time; 61 percent of those patients were dogs, 36 percent cats, and 3 percent other such as guinea pigs, rabbits, and ferrets. Seventy-four percent of owners stayed with their pet during euthanasia, and their comments were positive, all things considered. One respondent said, "Pyper finally seemed to relax, as if all her pain, cares and worries disappeared." Another wrote, "Her whole face took on the most peaceful appearance, as if she was healthy again. She looked beautiful again."

Yet the very idea of euthanasia polarized respondents. One pet owner pronounced, "Putting your pet to sleep is quite a euphemism. A better description is paralyze your pet and then stop their heart/breathing." Another declared, "Before he was brought in for me to hold, I was crying so hard and asking God 'Why?' and suddenly the door of the room opened slowly and gently, which made me think I can't be selfish."

No prevailing wisdom arose about what to do with the euthanized body. Fifty-eight percent of owners chose cremation: 29 percent storing the remains in an urn at home, 5 percent scattering them in a favorite place, 1 percent putting them in a box, and 23 percent asking the veterinarian

to dispose of them. Thirty-six percent buried their euthanized pet: 32 percent in sundry places such as the home garden or family farm and 4 percent in a pet cemetery. One percent donated the cadaver to a veterinary school. Five percent checked "other" but did not specify.

Besides homages via urns and gravestones, commemorations took numerous forms. The more frequent answers included photos on walls or in family albums, paw imprints, and monetary donations to animal shelters. Others said getting tribute tattoos, planting a tree/bush, displaying the animal's collar, posting on Facebook or other online memorials or making their own pet homepages, and making "a yearly toast to Flicker's life on his birthday including all family members via Skype or speakerphone." Fifty-eight percent obtained another pet, typically the same type of animal, over a vast range of time: one day to 25 years.

More than 90 percent agreed that the veterinarian did an overall excellent job and exhibited compassion and care toward the animal and the owner. Eighty-nine percent agreed that the veterinarian possessed good communication skills. Twenty percent of the time the veterinarian suggested palliative care instead of euthanasia, and 76 percent of those clients heeded the advice. Only 21 percent of veterinarians offered grief support, whether individual or group, face-to-face, by phone, or online. Twenty-five percent of owners took advantage of this outreach. The scant bereavement counseling warrants further investigation to determine if there is an industry-wide problem the field ought to address.

### Moral compass

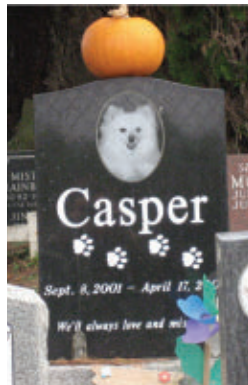
The interpretation, function, and rank of household pets have elevated since the 1800s. Today, when a companion animal dies or is euthanized, owners respond with customs comparable to those for dead humans. "Our pets are members of our family and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect," asserts an American funeral home that also cremates pets.<sup>64</sup> What's more, owners now mourn and honor their companion animal by commissioning a portrait, buying a stone accent for the yard, or having jewelry crafted in the pet's image or from its ashes — by adapting conventions historically applied to human counterparts.<sup>65</sup> Only time will tell if such patterns will persist. ♦



**George Dickinson**, Professor of Sociology at College of Charleston, his Phi Kappa Phi chapter, spent spring 2013 at University of Bristol (U.K.) School of Veterinary Sciences researching pet end-of-life issues. He has authored or coauthored 24 books, including *Understanding Dying, Death and Bereavement*, now in its eighth edition (Wadsworth/Cengage), and more than 90 scholarly articles primarily on end-of-life topics in humans and pets. Dickinson has been a research fellow in palliative medicine at University of Sheffield Medical School and Lancaster University School of Health and Medicine. Email him at [dickinsong@cofc.edu](mailto:dickinsong@cofc.edu).



For works cited, go online to [www.phikappaphi.org/forum/summer2014](http://www.phikappaphi.org/forum/summer2014).



Some 14,000 companion animals, from dogs and cats to cheetahs and goldfish, spend eternity at Pet's Rest Cemetery and Crematory in Colma, Calif. The site, opening in 1947, also has performed about 90,000 cremations.