

Memorializing a Pet

On my article on guilt, I talked about the importance of focusing on positive memories of your pet. Remembering the good times that you shared with that pet can help counteract the guilt and grief that come with its loss.

One way to help yourself focus on those positive memories is to develop a memorial to your pet—a tribute or reminder that will actively help you access and concentrate on those recollections. Creating such a tribute can be an effective tool to help you cope with grief (though it may certainly produce a few tears in the process!), and it will also provide you with a loving reminder of that pet in the years to come.

There are many ways to memorialize a pet. Here are a few of the most popular:

1. Develop a photo tribute. One way to do this is to choose an especially good photo of your pet and have it beautifully framed, and place it where it will bring you the most comfort. Another is to gather a collection of representative photos—i.e., photos of your pet engaged in different activities, and at different ages—and turn them into a collection or collage. For example, you can purchase mats with cut-outs for as many as 20 photos (perhaps even more), and this provides a lovely way to display a collection. You can then put the matted collection in a nice frame, which will help preserve it.

2. Have a portrait painted. Many pet portrait artists list their services in pet magazines; you may also find one in your local yellow pages. (You can also find such services online by searching under “pet portraits.”) Such artists generally work from photos (it being a bit difficult to persuade a pet to “sit” for a portrait). All you need to do, therefore, is to find a good quality photo of your pet (preferably

one that gives a good view of its face) and send or bring it to the artist. Many people consider a portrait that is an original work of art to be a better tribute to a pet than a photograph.

3. Create a craft tribute. If you enjoy a particular type of art or craft, consider using that to memorialize your pet. For example, I’ve used needlepoint kits that resemble my pets to create tributes. You can also find services that will transfer your pet’s photo onto a needlepoint canvas, or create a canvas from a photo. If you have a knack for painting ceramics or plaster, consider painting a statue that resembles your pet.



4. Create a written tribute. A written tribute can take just about any form: A poem to or about your pet, a letter to your pet (or even “from” your pet to you), an account of your pet’s life, or anything else that seems an effective way of expressing your feelings and memories. This could also be done as a family project, with each member contributing their own materials, which can then be assembled in a single volume that can be shared by all.

With today’s printing technologies, you can even extend this option by having an actual bound book printed that includes both written tributes and photos. The easiest way to do this is to prepare the written tributes on a computer and print them off in the desired format (e.g., with your choice of fonts, formats, colors, etc.). Have your favorite photos scanned (or scan them yourself if you have a scanner). You can then create a simple layout of text and artwork using a basic word-processing program (such as MS Word), or print out the photos and text and assemble them by hand. Your book can then be reproduced and “bound” at your local print or copy shop. This will cost a few dollars, but is a nice way to make copies for family members.

A word of warning about written tributes, however: While this is a wonderful way to work through your grief and memorialize your pet, don’t expect anyone outside your circle of family and friends to be seriously interested in what you’ve written. Don’t be tempted, for example, to fire off the life story of your pet to your favorite pet magazine. Pet magazines receive hundreds of this type of submission every year, and are unable to use them. No matter how wonderful and special your pet was to you, that doesn’t mean his/her life story is “publishable”—unless it was somehow truly unique!

5. Post a tribute online. A number of sites offer this as a free service; you’ll find some of those listings in our links section (<http://www.pet-loss.net/links/html>). Because so many sites *do* offer this service at no cost, I do not recommend paying for this service—unless you feel that the site is sponsored by a worthy organization and your fee will directly contribute to that organization. Many sites also let you post a picture of your pet.

6. Plant a tree. A company called Treegivers offers to plant a tree in your pet’s name, in the state of your choice. Or, plant a tree or special plant in your own garden for “remembrance.” One person

planted a special catnip patch. Your city parks department might also allow you to plant a tree in a city park in memory of your pet.

7. Obtain a special urn for your pet's ashes. If you have chosen cremation for your pet, you may wish to keep its ashes in a decorate urn. Today, you can find a marvelous array of urns on the market. They come in fine woods, stained glass, gleaming metal, or even as carvings of specific breeds. To find lists of urn manufacturers, check the classifieds and back-page ads of major pet magazines.

8. Contribute to an animal welfare organization. Often, animal shelters will provide a plaque or paving stone with your pet's name on it for a minimum donation. For example, when the humane society in Olympia, Washington, relocated, it offered brass plaques that were used to line the walls in the main lobby; for a donation, one could have one's pet's name and a message etched on the plaque. Nor are you limited to pet organizations; when the library in San Carlos, CA, opened its new facility, it offered paving stones that could be etched with a message, and many tributes to beloved pets became a permanent part of the facility.

9. Contribute to the cure. If your pet died of a particular disease, there may be a research organization that is seeking a cure. A contribution to that organization may help other pets (and pet owners) in the future.

10. Shop for a memorial item. Believe it or not, I've actually found shopping to be immensely therapeutic. I still have a beautiful bronze-like statue (it's really plaster, but it *looks* like bronze) that I bought when a beloved cat died nearly 15 years ago. The cat was black, so I found a cat-themed store and bought just about everything I could find with a black cat motif.

Here are some tips from visitors to the Pet Loss Support Page:

- Put your pet's picture in a photo-display box (one that has a place in the top for a photo). Put some of the pet's treasures inside the box, such as a collar or a lock of hair.
- Place a memorial stone or marker in your garden, even if you have not buried your pet at home.
- Keep a journal to help you through the grieving process. Record your pet's life story in that journal.
- Build your own website in tribute to your pet.
- Put a special statue (not necessarily a funeral marker) in a garden spot that your pet loved. E.g., a statue of a pet, or of an angel, or St. Francis.
- Create a stepping stone for your garden in memory of your pet, or to mark its grave or the burial place of its ashes. There are many kits available that enable you to make your own stone and personalize it. This reader noted, "For example, my cat loved to eat fish and I found glass fish with which to make a mosaic."

What I don't recommend is turning a memorial into a "shrine." I realize that some people really like shrines, but in my view, this tends to keep one's mind and heart focused on "death and loss"—not on living, loving, and remembering. Your pet was a part of your life, and its tribute should also be a part of your life—not a perpetual reminder of its death.



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If you're grieving the loss of a pet, you'll find more helpful tips in Moira Allen's book, *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1598584537/>

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