

Re-membering pets: Documenting the meaning of people’s relationships with these family members

By Barbara Baumgartner



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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the significance of people’s relationships with their pets. Using a process of collective documentation, I will discuss the meaning that is created in these relationships, its effects on people, and the relevance for the field of narrative therapy.

Keywords: pets, re-membering, narrative therapy, weblogs, collective document

An introduction to me and my interest in pets

I've had many relationships with animals and pets over my lifetime and it is probably my love of all things furry that drew me to this topic. I grew up on a cattle and pork farm and was surrounded by animals for the nineteen years that I lived there. In addition to the livestock (many of whom had been named by my family) I grew up surrounded by other pets – always a farm dog and motley broods of cats. These pets were my regular playmates.

With time, I've collected memories of pet-owners and pets. Seeing other people with their pets is something very moving for me. This is particularly so when I see people living on the street – many of whom have a pet with them. I remember travelling in San Francisco, CA, and saw a man with a cart filled with his belongings. Beside it and on top of it sat his two cats. This was so clearly a home for the three of them. The cats looked so content. I stopped to talk to the man and ask him his cats' names and to take their picture. Like most pet owners, he was so proud of his cats and spoke of them with tenderness. He, like many other people living on the street, care for their pets in such beautiful ways. I suspect that people often prioritise the care of their pets much higher than the care for themselves.

How pets help humans

The literature pertaining to the impact that pets have on humans' lives reveal that pets can have positive benefits for both physical and mental health (for example, Horowitz, 2008; McNicholas, Gilbey, Rennie, Ahmedzai, Dono, & Ormerod, 2005; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000; Wilson & Turner, 1998). While some studies remain to be replicated, and there is a difficulty in ascertaining exactly why a benefit exists, pets are good for our health as they lower our stress, anxiety, and blood pressure, help prevent heart disease, as well as help us live longer after heart attacks. They raise our spirits, decrease loneliness, increase our exercise (for dog owners) and thus increase opportunities for social interactions (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992; Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980; McNicholas et al., 2005; Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000; Wilson & Turner, 1998). The presence of a friendly animal can promote feelings of safety and reduce anxiety (for example, Friedmann, 1995), which is likely why animals are also used for 'Animal Assisted Therapy' and many nursing homes have a resident dog or cat. Earlier this year, I attended a conference at a large hotel that also had a 'house dog' for guests to interact with. How amazing that even hotels now acknowledge that we would miss our pets while travelling away from home!

Within the field of narrative therapy, pets have been recognised and utilised in re-membering conversations. For example, Yuen (2007) illustrates the re-membering of Max the dog in her work with a boy who had experiences of abuse. It is through such conversations, Yuen writes, that the child is able to explore his responses to trauma through a story of 'two-way contribution' between child and pet (p. 12). As well, the report, *These are not ordinary lives* (ACT Mental Health Consumers Network & Dulwich Centre, 2003) touches on the importance of pets while summarising the themes that emerged from community consultations with mental health consumers. Participants in the consultation name the connections to pets (as well as family and friends) as an important source of sustenance, and acknowledge the connections to pets as precious and unique. Within the report are stories of people's special knowledge of their connections with pets. One person, particularly, spoke of a 'two-way caring' (p. 38) and how the concern for a pet's wellbeing assisted the person to keep thoughts of suicide and self-harm at bay. This type of knowledge and assistance is vitally important in conversations with people who struggle with such concerns as loneliness, suicidal thoughts, stress, or difficulty getting out of bed.

The process

Because my relationships with pets and animals have been so sustaining and meaningful, I wondered if it might be the same for other people, so I set out to learn more. I wanted to learn more about the meaning that people make from their relationships with pets. To investigate the special bond between humans and pets, I set up a blog (a Web log: www.rememberingpets.blogspot.com) to post questions and invite people's responses.

The questions I asked

The kinds of questions I asked initially fell roughly into two categories. First, I asked a lot about people's pets – I called this 'Re-remembering Pets' as it seemed to fit with the ideas of remembering practices of narrative therapy (Hedtke & Winslade, 2004; Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 1989, 1995, 1997) that are about bringing someone to life and into the room. Here are the questions I asked:

- Can you tell me a little about your pet (name, breed, personality) and how you came into each other's lives?
- Can you say a little about what it is you enjoy doing together – are there certain activities your pet most enjoys?
- When you are doing these activities, what is it that you notice about your pet that lets you know they are enjoying the activity?
- When you are enjoying spending time with your pet, what is it about you that your pet would notice that would let s/he know you are enjoying being together?
- What does having a pet mean to you?
- What contributions does your pet make to your life? Can you tell a small story to illustrate this?
- What kinds of things has your pet taught you? About yourself or about life?
- What kinds of things might your pet know or notice about you that people might overlook or not know?
- What do you think you bring to your pet's life?
- What kind of little things do you do for your pet that would let them know you care for them?
- What kinds of things does your pet do to let you know they care for you?
- Are you able to be yourself with your pet in ways that you aren't able with people? If so, how?
- If you could see yourself through your pet's eyes, what would you most value or appreciate about yourself?
- What do you value about having a pet?
- What difference has your pet made to your life? In what ways are you or your life different with having a pet than if you didn't?
- What is it like to talk about your pet in this way? Has it got you thinking about anything that you may not have previously?

The second set of questions I asked people about their pets was around the theme of how pets can sustain us through hard times. Here are the questions for that topic:

- Can you tell me a little about your pet (name, breed, personality) and how you came into each other's lives?
- What do you like or appreciate about your pet?
- Where did you learn that a pet can be supportive or sustaining through a difficult time? What were the circumstances of how you learned this – for example, how old were you, who was the pet, where were you living ...?
- Is there someone (like a friend or a relative) who introduced you to how a pet can be supportive or sustaining through a difficult time?
- Are there activities or times together that you spend with your pet that have helped you through a hard time? Can you tell me a small story as an example?
- Does your pet notice when you are going through a difficult time? If so, what would your pet notice?
- What is it about being with your pet that helps you get through a bad day or a difficult time?
- What do you value about your pet when you are having a hard time?
- What is it like to talk about your pet in this way? Has it got you thinking about anything that you may not have previously?

From the outset I intended to compile respondents' answers to generate a collective document –and post this on the blog to present back. A collective document (Denborough, 2008) is a document that captures the themes of people's responses and summarises what is similar and dissimilar across a group of people. Often collective documents are created when a group of people has gotten together (usually in person) to talk about a shared concern or problem. It is a means of collating people's input about an issue, but also a way to capture or summarise their unique responses to the concern or problem. The people who answered the blog questions weren't consulting me about a problem – they were just sharing with me about their experiences with pets. These responses are subordinate and often untold stories, and I hoped that, by gathering these stories together, the meaning people made of their relationships with pets would be thickened.

I invited people to send me pictures of their pets along with their stories, and these pictures, along with the collective document, were posted on the blog. Pictures can bring life to a story and to the personality of a pet.

After I compiled a draft of the collective document, I circulated it among participants to check for accuracy and to solicit feedback. For the most part, there were no concerns and respondents were generous to share their time and stories.

Blogs and internet communities

This leads me to comment briefly on the medium I've used to collect information from people – the blog and the internet. In thinking about narrative practices, it seems relevant to highlight the role of the internet. Linking people's lives to one another around shared themes is a component of narrative practice, and it is fair to say that the internet has done so quite easily. Many people receive e-newsletters, listen to podcasts, visit websites, and read blogs that are related to topics of interest or membership of 'real' or virtual groups. For example, I receive the Dulwich Centre e-Newsletter, which helps me stay connected to practices of other narrative folks around the world and helps me feel part of a group that has a shared interest. The internet

connects diverse and similar people across the globe in a way that was unpredictable twenty years ago and now is taken for granted.

While there are many disadvantages to the anonymity the internet provides users (such as ease of bullying), anonymity is also a benefit, especially for people who are searching for connections and community but need time before sharing about themselves. Anonymity allows people to tread slowly and safely. There was only one person who responded to the blog questions anonymously but many people requested that I only use their first name when quoting them. I think that the opportunity to share anonymously or semi-anonymously can assist people to share their thoughts in a measured way that is comfortable.

The anonymity and freedom of the computer-mediated communication also helps people to construct their own individual identity as well as a group identity within the online community to which they belong. Online computer games (for example, MMORPG, a genre of role-playing games, Wikipedia, n.d.) allow us to create entirely new identities or avatars and engage in fantasy play with abilities and characteristics that people lack in the real world. Turkle (1995) ascertains that exploring different roles and gender identities using MMORPGs can help people expand their emotional range. The internet, whether it be online communities we participate in or virtual games we play, allows users to create identity. Such opportunities to create identity or practice new identities are fertile ground for narrative therapists.

It is pertinent to remember these types of virtual memberships and online communities in our conversations with people about the clubs of life (White, 2007) to which they belong. Thus, membership in virtual communities (defined as a 'communication and information system of social networks whose participants share a common interest, idea, task or goal that interact in a virtual society across time, geographical and organizational boundaries and where they are able to develop personal relationships', Wikipedia, n.d.) has a great deal of relevance. Using a computer is just one way for people to connect with others around a shared theme, but it is one that narrative therapists should also consider in our conversations.

An overview of themes and the meaning of pets

In collating the collective document, several themes emerged from people's responses, which are summarised below. It is clear that pets generate significant meaning in human lives. For many, pets are not seen as 'only animals'. Rather, they are family members, friends, companions, protectors, and children. They love unconditionally and are happy recipients of love, time and acts of affection, while supporting us with their presence and protecting us from possible dangers. Pets also change us by teaching us skills, enriching certain qualities we possess, or by giving us opportunities to express emotions that may otherwise go unexpressed.

The uniqueness of pets

From reading people's responses to the questions, it was evident that pets provide people with relationships that are special and unique and that pets offer people something that humans just can't provide. Perhaps it is the simple distinction that pets are non-human that makes the human-pet connection unique. People commented on pets' unique abilities that they considered meaningful. As well, the support and love people receive from their pets is distinctive and separate from the support received from humans. As one respondent stated:

Animals don't seem to harbour the same feelings as people and don't seem to 'keep score' when you haven't always had enough time. *Anonymous*

Another person (Patricia) said:

'I deeply appreciate the fact that he doesn't talk. I think words can be a hindrance for me during emotionally painful times, his quiet steady presence is extremely comforting and soothing.'

How pets transform us

While respondents didn't use the word 'transformation', many gave examples of how their pets had touched their lives and what their pet had taught them. It is clear that people felt their lives would have not been the same without a pet – that it would have lacked these connections. As SK said so succinctly in describing how her cat came to live with them:

'Life was never the same as we had a beam of innocent pink love in our home all the time.'

The role of pets and our emotions

Another theme uncovered in the responses was related to people's emotions – that relationships with pets allow people ease of access to or connection with feelings that they may not as easily have access to with humans. They allow people to give and receive love freely and provide opportunities to be playful or silly when people might not otherwise be able to.

Creating new identities through our pets

Similar to the opportunity to experience emotions in new or safe ways, pets provided people with opportunities to create a new identity for themselves. Many people spoke about not having human children and how pets provided them an opportunity to be a mother or parent and that was a significant experience to have in their life. For example, SK said:

'Never having been the mother of a human child, I feel they introduced me to the mother in me.'

People spoke about the 'responsibility' of having a pet and how this experience of responsibility was rich and meaningful. As well, pets can provide an experience of being 'known' or understood in a way that is different from humans. In this sense, a pet can be a mirror for our actions and provide acknowledgement or recognition that is not received in other relationships or interactions.

How pets are sustaining or supportive

I had originally asked about this topic – how pets sustain us through difficult times – as it was pertinent to me. Due to my personal experiences when pets gave me a warm refuge as well as experiences of calm and fun, I assumed that others may have received support or comfort from their pets as well. This was indeed the case, although people spoke mostly about the support they have received as adults from their animals. CW wrote:

'The day my mother died, I came home and sat on the floor with my dog, crying. He sat there with me and pushed his face into my neck, and just stayed there with me.'

LS shared:

'I went away for a month last year to live on my own. I was miserably lonely. After 10 days I flew back to get my cat. Once I had him with me I was fine. It felt like home once I had him to greet me at the door.'

One respondent, AG, referred to the health benefits that a pet provides. She writes that having a dog forced her to go out for walks or reminded her of her own need to eat when she would have otherwise not.

'... exercise is helpful when I'm sad. It's easy to decide to walk Charlie because he needs it ... rather than take myself for a walk because I need it.'

This is an indirect way that pets are supportive or sustaining – that, due to their need to be cared for in certain ways, our own physical and mental health benefits.

A two-way caring

A final theme arose from all the stories people shared – a theme of what people do for their pets that is special and that reflects their love for and connections with their pets. Several described special routines they go through with their animals or special moments that they set aside to have with their pet that appeared to be about doing something they knew their pet would like or appreciate – such as letting them lick them on the face or buying them special food treats. SC shared:

'My favourite thing is to give her love by rubbing her ears, petting her head and telling her she is a good girl.'

These opportunities to give love to pets in addition to receiving love are special moments that give people opportunities to 'be' in ways they wouldn't otherwise. Experiencing the joy and pleasure we bring to an animal is an ability or identity that we might not otherwise experience.

Responses to the collective document

Collating a collective document was a tricky process. With so much material generated, it was difficult to identify themes and to feel assured that I didn't miss themes. Additionally, it was a challenge to pick quotes to be shared in the final document. I was conscious of wanting to ensure that everyone who participated was represented in the document, but it was still difficult to be equitable, as not everyone's responses spoke to the themes or to the initial questions. As well, it was important to not censor or sanitise responses but rather to represent the full range of diversity of responses.

The feedback on the document was positive. For example, MC wrote:

'I loved reading this. I had lots of happy tears!'

CW shared:

'What a beautiful document!!! It was just lovely to read through people's experiences of love – pet love. Reading about my own and others' experience of this very noble love seemed to honour it in ways that made it even more real ... Love that doesn't question. It just is.'

MP wrote:

'It was very interesting to see how my relationship with Big-dog and Little-dog became more meaningful as I read my fellow-pet-project-partners (who I got to meet virtually thanks to you) stories about their relationships ... ideas of dignity, support, companionship, loyalty, family became even more available ...'

Collective contribution of subordinate stories and linking lives

While the people who participated in this pets project did not know each other or even meet each other in person, from their reflections it is clear that the process of collective documentation can be contributory for individuals. In this process, people have the experience of contributing to other people's lives, as well as their own lives being enriched or pet memories being reinvigorated. Two people commented to me how the process of answering the questions rekindled memories of past pets, thereby awakening and acknowledging emotions connected to these memories. LG wrote:

'I hope this [stories of their dog, Sam] helps Barb. At least it can't hurt and I've had a little cry remembering my mate.'

SK shared about her experience in answering the re-membering questions about her cat who had died in October 2007:

'That's all I can manage for now. The questions have brought my grief to the surface in yet a deeper way.'

While participants in this project were not gathering together to address a shared problem or concern, the process was still generative.

One participant, Patricia, after her dog became critically ill, shared the impact of reading her own and others' words. She wrote:

Hi Barbara, I got your email just a few minutes ago, and reading the draft of your work was so wonderful, it just felt like healing words soothing my mind. It is so good to know others feel as I do about the animals in their lives. This has really been an unexpected but very fulfilling experience for me to be a part of your work, you have presented and described the experiences so effectively – the excerpts are so touching. I'm really glad you sent it to me, I'm going to pick up Sammie [her dog] this afternoon and somehow just reading it made me feel more 'normal' (what a horrible concept, I would hate to be that ...) about what I'm feeling about him.

From the process of collective documentation, people involved in this project had an experience of being part of a collective – a collective of people who were honouring their pets. And, by reading their own words and stories linked with each other's, participants had an experience of making a contribution to others' lives.

What is the significance in relation to narrative practice?

Depending upon local prevailing discourses, talking in-depth about the significance that pets play in our lives might not be routinely done. Ideas about the lesser status of animals and the human-animal connection may minimise the extent to which we talk with people about pets. Indeed, it is frequently only through loss that the meaning of one's pet is acknowledged and, even then, people can feel pressured to downplay the extent of their grief. This project highlights that there is space and substance for conversations about the meaning of pets in people's lives. Incorporating pets into narrative conversations can take various forms, including re-membering practices and serve different purposes, such as providing openings for subordinate story development.

Re-membering practices

The categories of inquiry that could be applied to conversations with people about pets can be drawn from Michael White's re-membering map (White, 2007). That is:

- A. Figure's contribution to the person's life (naming the contribution the pet has made to our life).
- B. Person's identity through eyes of figure (our perception of how the pet views us).
- C. Person's contribution to the figure's life (naming the contribution we have made to the pet's life).
- D. Implications of this contribution for figure's identity (the pet's perception of how we view them). (White, 2007, p. 129)

Re-membering practices that link people's lives to the lives of their pets (as well as other significant figures from a person's past, present, and future) serve as an additional way to populate a person's club or association of life. Additionally, therapists have opportunities to link people with other people who have pets and with the stories of their pets. For example, outsider witnesses who also have sustaining or unique relationships with pets might be chosen purposefully to thicken an alternative story and to link people's lives along shared themes.

Alternative and preferred story development

Having conversations with people who shine the light on particular knowledge of their skills and abilities, assists in alternative story development. When consulting with people about the support, love, friendship, protection, and companionship they and their pets exchange, this knowledge can be documented to ensure that it is accessible when people go through difficult times. The process of naming what it is we give to our pets and what we receive from them, also creates openings for alternative story development.

Talking about pets might also provide openings for re-authoring conversations and to name people's intentional understandings of what it is they accord value to (landscape of identity). Stories of how people's actions toward their pets translate into what they give meaning to can be scaffolded over time and according to a plot. The 'absent but implicit' within people's pet stories also opens doors to intentional understandings. For example, asking more about the importance of the opportunity to 'be a mother' may provide a rich description of the history of

this desire or ability. It seems significant that people who do not have (human) children refer to their pets as their babies or children. Pets provide people access to a role and an identity that would otherwise be unattainable. It is in these relationships and roles that we are constructing new identities.

A reflection on this project

It was a gift to receive stories of pet love from around the world. Reading about the mutual respect, love, and joy that is exchanged between humans and pets was so touching. It now encourages me to slow down and loiter in a new way when I hear mention of a pet. Animals impact our actions and the meaning we draw from our actions, and thus they add to who we are. I am excited to explore this idea of how pets contribute to identity formation.

Re-membering Pets Collective Document

Over a few months of Canadian summer, people from Australia and North America connected using the World Wide Web through a blog (web log) about their relationships with pets. A narrative practitioner posted questions on the Re-membering Pets blog – www.rememberingpets.blogspot.com - to ask for people's stories about the meaning and role of pets in their lives and how animals have sustained them through difficult or challenging times. People shared their stories about their pets from present and past and sent in photos. Photos, a video and some of the responses about people's relationships with their dogs and cats were posted on the blog website. Using people's responses to the posted questions, various themes were identified and this document attempts to summarise these themes about meaning and significance that pets impart in our lives.

Please note that if you participated in this project and have concerns about how your words have been quoted, or if you would like to comment, please email rememberingpets@gmail.com. If you have general feedback to make after reading this document please also feel free to email.

Themes

Pets as family members:

In how some people spoke about their pets, it was clear that pets are considered family members and not just 'pets'. For some, animals are just pets, but for many they are more – they are family.

'Yup I'm a sucker for our dogs looking at me at 5am as the kids have woken everyone up and as if the dog says with a sigh 'let's get going'. And a smile comes across her face and mine too as we start another day together as a family!'

'Onyx completes our family and it is nice to come home everyday to have someone excited to see you.'

'Bringing Little dog and Big dog to my life was like expanding my family.'

'They're like a loved family member that you truly cherish and are devastated once they're gone.'

'I suppose you could say he was our first 'family'.'

This status as a 'family member' sometimes requires that we take action that is out of the norm or exceptional – in order to ensure the entire family (pet included) can participate.

'Tuffy was part of our family. She went everywhere with us. I remember my parents would 'break rules' to have her with us. Like taking her on vacation and having her stay in hotel rooms where pets were not allowed. My mom even tried taking her into the parliament buildings inside her coat when we went for a tour.'

Not only did many refer to pets as family members, several people spoke also of how the presence of a pet constituted what was 'home'. This suggests that a place without a pet might not be a 'home' for some, and perhaps that it is less about where we are and more about who is with us that creates a sense of home.

'I went away for a month last year to live on my own. I was miserably lonely. After 10 days I flew back to get my cat. Once I had him with me I was fine. It felt like home once I had him to greet me at the door.'

'When we didn't have a dog it felt like that our home didn't have a soul.'

A couple of people identified that, while they may not live with other humans, having a pet meant that they lived with family. A presence of a pet can keep feelings of loneliness at bay and be a comfort whether a person lives alone or lives with other humans.

'It's really a relief to feel like I have another family member – definitely not lonely having him around.'

Offering friendship:

In addition to being family members, for some, pets are also viewed as friends. People shared how their pets offer a unique kind of friendship – one that asks very little in return and is grateful for whatever is given to them.

'Pets have always been a friend when you need them even when you can't find a human friend. I know they always seem to appreciate your time whether it's a few quick pats or a calm relaxing stroke that lets you both enjoy the moment.'

'... and as soon as he saw me he jumped on my lap and put his paw in my shoulder. That was the beginning of another very significant friendship.'

'I also value the special relationship that the three of us have created. I value their companionship and the joy they bring to my life.'

'He is truly my very best friend.'

Feeling loved and supported by one's pet:

People named a myriad of feelings they experienced with their pets – in addition to happiness and fun, love and support were frequently identified. A pet's steady presence and unwavering love translates into support for us. We recognise this support, receive it, and appreciate it. People also simply enjoyed seeing their pets' unique expressions of love and happiness. Pets let us know in various ways that they do indeed love us – the looks that pets give us and their responses at the door confirm for us that our pets love and care for us just as we care for them. In fact, being met at the door with excitement after a long day at work feels very acknowledging and welcoming!

'He always liked to be a little ahead in the water though ... he continually looks back at me to check that I'm there, in the water and on land, and in that I know he loves me and wants to make sure I'm still there, and safe. That feels amazing.'

'Charlie gives love – and keeps on giving it. Charlie is eternally happy – a pure, innocent, bouncy happiness that cannot be ignored. Regardless of what you're going through, he demands attention to his happiness, which of course is infectious.'

'There is something about his steadiness and commitment to me which is nice. Even though he is friendly with everyone in the neighborhood, he always comes home to me and always greets me when I get home.'

'His excitement to see me, be it a separation of 2 minutes or 2 hours, is heartwarming. And I too adore seeing his face whenever I look at him.'

'Raph offers me the experience of being loved, through each moment of each day – even when he's had enough and is napping (which is often), there is still, for me, that sharedness that means so much.'

'When I come home from work she greets me by jumping at me insisting on me picking her up but I don't pick her up instantly because she will accidentally do pee pee on me. She then proceeds to say I Love you in a barking fashion. Now you may think ... yeah right ... well it is true, it sounds like a howl that has the same syllable breaks as actually saying I love you.'

'I love how they pant with excitement and meet me at the door...'

'Miresa gives us unconditional love at all times. We could just be going out to the mailbox and the thirty seconds that we have been gone is a lifetime to her and she greets us as so.'

'He gives me a lot of love – greets me at the door, comes when I call him, sleeps on my pillow most nights.'

'My pet makes me happy, e.g., when I come home from work he's always there and always glad to see me and he makes me feel wanted and welcome.'

'... when I come home, they both express their joy to see me. Big dog jumps at me as soon as I open the door, and Little dog positions himself in a 'pick up' position for me to hold him.'

'Joe is particularly good at greeting me when I get home. We have a routine where he comes running out to the car and jumps in even before I can get out. I always say 'Hi bubby! How's my favourite cat?' He trots along side me as I come into my home. This

was particularly special to me during times when I felt a desire to have someone to come home to.'

'She always follows me around and waits by the door when I go away. She goes nuts when I come home.'

'Pets bring happiness to my life. I know before I got the first kitten, the house seemed a little empty. Now when I come in the door, all these little faces look up at me as if to say "I missed you ... thanks for coming back". I love it.'

Within our connection to pets, some people referred to a kind of 'two-way caring' that occurred between themselves and their pet. We receive the love and support from our pets, but we also give caring back to them. We take care of them but pets also take care of us in unique ways. As mentioned, seeing a pet's excitement to see us return home, adds to our knowledge that pets care about us – and just knowing that pets care is sustaining.

'I have come to learn that caring is not unidirectional.'

'She also gives me a lot of love. I can tell that she worries about me.'

'I have experienced a sense of me contributing to their lives, and them contributing to mine.'

- Have you experienced a 'two-way caring' with your pet?
- What does this 'two-way caring' offer or mean to you?

Feeling supported and sustained through difficult times by one's pet:

While many people expressed that they felt loved by their pets and that they experienced this love as a type of support, some people shared that their pets had been of particular assistance through hard times. For some it is that pets can sense when we are in pain and know when to come to us, for others it was the steady presence of their pet and their pets' love that was helpful or nourishing. Pets give unconditional love and this love sustains us through difficult times.

'I simply cannot imagine how I could have gotten through the past 10 years without him by my side. I lost both my mother and second father in the past 2 years and thank g-d Sammie has been there with me. What a quiet and potent source of inspiration, love, and steadfastness his is, and has been.'

'I appreciate his little purring body when he lays on my hurting heart.'

'During a very hard time in my life, the vet told me I should put her down and I said, 'No, she should live'. To which, he said okay, and we did surgery. And she lived. I think this was mostly willpower on her part. I think she knew I needed her.'

'From the outset, Charlie traveled with me ... and I still consider that it was his presence that preserved my sanity.'

'When you break up from a girlfriend – you knew you could always go to him and he was there for you and he made the tears go away.'

'I like to think/pretend that Charlie notices when I'm going through a hard time ... but he doesn't really. When times were hard for me, I used to have him sleep on my bed

with me. This was such a comfort to have a living, breathing, warm presence with me. Now that I'm partnered, there's a 'no dogs on the bed' rule ... and I really miss being able to have him up for a cuddle when I'm sad. Charlie doesn't notice when I'm sad – he just loves the bonus of being let in the house; allowed on my lap; etc.'

'The day my mother died I came home and sat on the floor with my dog, crying. He sat there with me and pushed his face into my neck, and just stayed there with me.'

'Ella was part of what kept me linked to good people during a time when it felt like my whole life was falling apart.'

'... exercise is helpful when I'm sad. It's easy to decide to walk Charlie because he needs it ... rather than take myself for a walk because I need it.'

In response to whether a pet notices when they are going through a hard time: 'Yes he does notice; he becomes more smoochy.'

Feeling protected by one's pet:

In addition to the love and support that pets give us so freely, several women mentioned that their dogs give them protection or safety. The presence of our pets helps us feel safe in a potentially dangerous world as we know our animals stand guard for us.

'I love to walk at night, and you can't really, safely as a woman alone in the city, however I always feel safe with him, down by the seawall at 1 am, even though I know deep down, he doesn't really have the capacity to hurt anyone.'

'When alone, I feel much more safe sleeping in the house with my dog in it.'

'When they bark at strangers who approach me, I know they are being protective until I give them a sign that is ok ...'

Feeling known or understood by one's pet:

Pets understand our actions and us as unique individuals in ways that humans might not be able to sense or discern. Pets are perceptive of our moods and provide a mirror of our actions and, as a result, they can give us support in their special ways. Because we feel understood by our pets, we are also able to receive their caring and support when it is provided. Related to a theme that will be discussed later in this document, feeling understood by our pet allows us to be 'ourselves'.

'He knows how hard I work, and how much I give in that context. He sometimes looks at me with disapproval when I have taken myself (and him) into another session when he thinks we should be going home.'

'Miresa always knows when either me or Theresa is not feeling well. She comes to us and cuddles. She won't leave our sight until we feel better.'

'He notices I'm good looking with a strong physique and that I'm just me and I'm there for him.'

'My cats can tell when I need a cuddle.' ... 'My cats always know when I'm sick or overtired ... they lay with me on the bed and cuddle me.'

Offering something that people can't offer:

Pets give us something that is unique and different to what humans can. This is an important factor in the relationships we have with our pets. Pets give their affection so freely and unconditionally, they provide good company, and they don't speak, judge, or gossip – these unique qualities translate into the special-ness of what pets offer us. It is significant that pets are different to people. Our relationships with them are different, and thus we can experience our pets and ourselves in a different way.

'Animals don't seem to harbour the same feelings as people, and don't seem to 'keep score' when you haven't always had enough time.'

'With both, I can talk in English and Spanish and they understand both languages therefore they get to know me in both cultural languages.'

'Pets can be good company so that when the house is empty of other people you don't feel quite so alone.'

'This has been the greatest love affair of my life.'

'It was great to have a mate you could tell anything to, and know it wouldn't be blabbed everywhere and never having to worry about backchat or disagreement. If only we humans could relate in the same way.'

'When I have been sad in my life, I have sobbed laying my head right on his tummy – when I am happy, I have danced with him and run around and wrestled him.'

'He reminds me of all that is good in living creatures. When he's playful and happy, running around in circles in a grassy field and playing with another dog, I feel a sense of happiness and joy unmatched in me, living vicariously through him and his freedom, his pure joy and also just so happy that he is having fun.'

'I deeply appreciate the fact that he doesn't talk. I think words can be a hindrance for me during emotionally painful times, his quiet steady presence is extremely comforting and soothing.'

'I can be unrestrained also – in talking, loving, expressing me in my world.'

'I really like enjoying nature with her. Taking her for walks on trails, going to the lake, taking her in the canoe, going snowshoeing with her.'

In response to what you value about having a pet: 'Having another life going on parallel to mine.'

'You can cry a lot around them. They never judge you. Never say anything mean to you. They will always be there for you. They always appreciate love.'

'I am allergic to animals and I can't imagine living without one.'

- Do you have other stories about how pets have offered you something that you wouldn't have gotten from the same moment with a human?
- What is significant for you about these times?
- Why are they significant?
- What have these moments made more possible?

Being in ways that we can't with people:

In addition to offering us something that other humans can't, pets allow us to be in ways with them that we can't be with people. Pets see sides of us that we might be unable or unwilling to show others and, as a result, they know us in ways that humans don't. For some of us these 'pet moments' are beneficial as knowing ourselves through our pet's eyes helps us construct an alternate identity of ourselves. One person wrote that, because of her pet, she knew she had qualities that humans might not see. Another shared that she had a special 'doggy voice' she would use with her pet. Pets are an audience to parts of us and our identities that we might not share with others – these parts contribute to the rich sense of ourselves we have. Pets provide an audience to us being 'ourselves' in a way that people can't witness.

'Emily and Sophie saw a silly part of me and a very soft part of me that I am reluctant to show others.'

'I am more silly with Miresa.'

'I can be goofier or more rhetorical, I guess.'

'Having a pet is so meaningful to me – it's an act of mutual love between two living beings that can just be themselves; no pretending.'

'They know how much love I have to give. That I am patient. I am much more impatient with humans.'

'I have cried with my dog when I am really sad and not wanted to be around people.'

- Do these descriptions of ways we can 'be' with a pet that is different from how we can 'be' with humans ring true to you?
- Are there other ways that you can be with your pet that you can't be with humans? If so, how?
- What does this way of 'being' offer you? – is it a way to be yourself, is it a way to 'be' different ...?
- What difference (if any) would it make to you if you could 'be' this way more?

Feeling connected to pets:

Animals are different than humans. Despite of or because of our differences, we are able to communicate and connect. People shared their experiences of connection to their pet and how the feelings between humans and pets run bi-directionally. A special space of connection is created between pets and people where we can understand them and feel understood.

'I talk with him about how lovely this is in tones that he understands – then he responds with a mightier tail wag. He knows when I relax into a moment – we are both more vibrant.'

'He has a look in his eyes when he's sad and you know he needs a cuddle. He has a way of sighing that means he's relaxed ... or that he's sad.'

'I love to touch, to feel softness, to fairly often relate to another – perhaps because I am a twin. So Raph and I talk together frequently through a day, and I construct lovely parts of my world from within this interaction.'

'He puts his nose on the tip of my nose and just sits there with me looking into each other's eyes. He jumps over me with unrestrained joy when I return from a 10 minute absence.'

'Onyx gets 'sleepy eyes – they are half closed and I can just feel that she is relaxed and happy. We have great eye contact which I love.'

Offering roles we might not otherwise have access to:

Responsibility:

Pets provide us with opportunities to be in ways we might not otherwise have access to. For example, several people spoke of a role of 'responsibility' they experienced as a child with a pet, and several mentioned responsibility now in adulthood. One person gave meaning to responsibility – that it was a helpful experience in childhood, and another named it as less fun in childhood. One person identified that having a dog allowed her to believe in her own ability to care-take for another living being. Another person described that the responsibility to care for her dog reminded her to also care for herself. In this respect, having caretaking responsibility for a pet is a way that pets can sustain us through difficult times. In crises or stress we may forget or de-prioritise our own care but, because of our need to look after our pet, we can be reminded to look after ourselves – eating or going for a walk. These activities of caretaking for a pet may also have vicarious positive effects for our own health and wellbeing even when we may not be able to focus on ourselves.

'I enjoyed taking care of my dog as a kid. I think it made me feel good to be given responsibilities of feeding or walking the dog.'

'I truly learned about the support of a pet by having Charlie. I had budgies as a kid, but my recollection of them is that they were more of a chore than an emotionally supportive presence in my life.'

'Growing up with a dog taught me about responsibility and about caring for animals.'

'Having a pet now has more meaning than when I was a child. As a child it was great at the beginning but then reality set in ... walking, feeding and taking care of the pet would not be fun as a child.'

'During those time of travel, having Charlie meant that I had to take care of a living being other than myself. I could no longer focus entirely on myself – but had to plan around Charlie's needs. This was very helpful, because it brought me back to some of the basics that I was actually neglecting for myself: one night I went to bed and then realised that I hadn't fed Charlie ... I raced out to put a bowl of food together for him ... then realised I hadn't fed myself.'

'She is my responsibility. Having a dog means you have to be home, have to walk it. Have to respond to its needs.'

'I might have been fearful as Little dog was when he first moved in. This fear was in relationship to me being unsure about having care-taking skills. However, my desire of rescuing this dog was more important than my own doubts and fears at the time, and luckily it happened that way. Little dog came into my life to challenge those ideas about doubt and taught me that I am actually not too bad on the care-taking job. It is a

position of taking care of them, but in a very special way, caring for their wellbeing and basic needs as they can't provide that for themselves, but also caring for our relationship of companionship by providing support to each other when needed.'

Offering roles we might not otherwise have access to:

Being a parent

A significant theme for people without (human) children is the experience of being a parent to their pet. Being in a parent role or experiencing having a 'child' to care for is meaningful and important to those of us who do not have human children to parent. Pets allow us to be a parent when we might have otherwise thought we lacked the skills or qualities to be in this role or identity. Through family and friends we have an audience to our parent 'identity'.

'He is like my child. I was unable to get pregnant after many years of trying and I now have a stepson and him, these are my children. I adore them.'

'Never having been the mother of a human child, I feel they introduced me to the mother in me.'

'We refer to her as our daughter or baby and all our family and friends take on grandma and auntie roles.'

'Miresa completes the life I have with Theresa. Theresa and I have a great relationship going on 6 years and bringing Miresa into it has fulfilled our parenting desires.'

'He is my baby.'

'She completes our family, she is my baby.'

- Has having a (non-human) 'child' been significant for you? Why or how?
- What has the experience of being a 'parent' in this way offered you that you would have missed out on otherwise?
- Do you think of yourself or your abilities any differently as a result of being this kind of parent? If so, how?

How pets change us / what they teach us:

The experience of having a pet changes us. We are not the same after this experience. We change, we learn, we grow – we are fundamentally different as a result of our pets. Our pets teach us about ourselves, they teach us skills, and they help us practice ways of being that we couldn't with people. Some people spoke about how their pet constantly reminded them of what is important in life – some of the more simple or basic things to not overlook, and that being reminded of the basics was helpful or grounding for them. Having a pet can have a downside for some, but overwhelmingly the pluses outweigh the negatives.

'Life was never the same as we had a beam of innocent pink love in our home all the time.'

'He's taught me that it's alright just to be me; I am enough.'

'It's a privilege to own a dog in your life and it gives so much joy and happiness.'

'I think I have a great ability to engage with the world and with people with a more loving and gentle spirit – I also know the cost of this – the responsibility of attending to another so constantly. Worth it though.'

'They taught what it looked like to completely relax into love.'

In response to what difference has a pet made to your life: 'Someone else to truly, truly love unconditionally and who truly loves you unconditionally.'

'Joe has taught me to be happy with what you have.'

'Having a pet has made so much of a difference. I am happier, more balanced, more confident and healthier than I was before Charlie came into my life. He has helped me relate better to myself and to other people over time.'

'Our two cats have taught me to nurture innocent beings, to be silly and childish, to be completely openhearted, to love unconditionally, to be frightened of aging and death.'

'They taught me about being dignified while being very ill.'

'Onyx grounds me and she reminds me to live simply. She lives the most simple life and is happy, so I try to follow her example.'

Charlie adds balance to my life; he brings me back to reality and grounds me in what is truly important in life – not a lot besides food in the belly, a drink of water, a safe place to sleep and someone to love and be loved by.'

'I value the things that I've learned about myself and about them. I have come to learn that because you are not human you deserve less respect of care. It helped me understand that no matter what category of living thing you are, we all deserve to be respected and treated well.'

'She taught me courage ...'

'They taught me about forgiveness, e.g., Emily got locked in the basement without food or water for three days while we were away and a tenant was coming in to feed the cats. The tenant thought Emily was hiding. She was so thirsty and hungry upon our return.'

'He has taught me not to judge, how many things don't really matter and how warmth, generosity and a loving response to the world are so very important.'

'It has been three years and Theresa and I still act like we just brought her home. We must have a thousand pictures of her and we still keep taking them at every moment that feels unique. The commitment and responsibility we have is incredible to see. Outsiders think we are newlyweds with a puppy.'

'She makes me happy. I think I am a happier person because I have a dog.'

'Emily came home with me. That little sweet being cracked my heart wide open.'

'Coal has taught me to be more mindful of when I have tone in my voice with my partner. She gets anxious when we start to bicker.'

Caretaking of pet memories:

Having a pet gives us many special moments. We hold onto these moments and revisit them to warm and uplift us. While our pet might not be still with us, they are not forgotten. As one person said:

‘Vague foggy memories of old and long gone pets from my childhood bring a smile to my face and a warmth to my heart and life. They kinda lay the heartstrings of your life, and they make a beautiful music that stays with you forever.’

General reflection questions:

- What was it like to read this document?
- Was there anything particular that caught your attention?
- Did any particular images or pictures come to mind? Did any pet memories from the past surface?
- Why do you think that this particular image or memory came to mind? How does it connect to you?
- Where are you now after reading the document? Are you thinking things or wanting to do things that you wouldn't have been before reading it?

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