

Unexpected grief: Elegy for a border collie

by [C. Clifton Black](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue



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On February 23, Libya was convulsed in civil revolt against Muammar Qaddafi, who threatened to shed his last drop of blood while tracking and killing the protesters. Turmoil throughout the Arab world triggered a spike in crude oil prices, a plummet in stock values and fear that much of the world would plunge into a recessionary tailspin. Meanwhile, in an animal hospital in Princeton, New Jersey, a dog was euthanized. God forgive me, but it is this last event that I will remember.

Pinky lived 16 years and six months—very old for a breed whose median age of death is about 12 years. Harriet and I purchased the pup when our daughter was five years old, so Caroline grew up with Pinky and he grew up with us. Though the expression may repel some, the fact remains that this dog was a member of our family and regarded as family by friends whom Pinky greeted at our door. Deprived of the sheep that he'd been bred to drive, he herded the Black family. He had the goods to do it. His papers testified to his purebred lineage among trial and show dogs in Sussex. Earlier this year a border collie reportedly recognized 1,022 words. Unlike me, Pinky never bit people or even growled at them. His policy toward rabbits, cats and other dogs was an unruffled live-and-let-live. Only one thing agitated him—a bicycle's spinning spokes. If he could, he would have run every Schwinn to earth, then licked each peddler into compliance.

Standing beside him as he was put to sleep, my wife and I found ourselves piercingly wounded. This took me by surprise. It was not our first brush with death. Harriet and I have buried three of our parents. When one reaches the far side of middle age, funeral homes are no novelty. Pinky was, as they say, only a dog. What, then, prevented me from washing Pinky's preferred cushion when I smelled his odor on it? Why was Harriet heartbroken at the sight of his leash on our porch and reminded of Tiny Tim's empty stool and abandoned crutch? Neither of us wears maudlin comfortably. What could account for such grief?

The answer is a quality of companionship lost. Evolutionary biologists tell us that dogs recognize humans as ambulatory meal tickets and have learned how to play us for saps. There may be truth in that. Nevertheless, when our collie laid his paws on my chest and licked my face, I could only experience his actions as affectionate. When Harriet relaxed in our study, Pinky would join her and express an uncanny intuition for human happiness or frustration, reacting with what appeared to us as empathy. Ray Bradbury wrote a book titled *Dogs Think That Every Day Is Christmas*. Every day for more than 16 years Pinky gave us canine Christmas presents. Of how many members among *Homo sapiens* could we say something comparable? To lose that is reason to grieve.

Another reason is the inescapability of death. To own and care for a pet during an extended period is to witness, as in time-lapse photography, one's own deterioration. Across 16 years a furry fireball grew grayer, slower, blinder, deafer and more arthritic. So have I. Like others who teach theology, I have upbraided our society's denial of death while denying mortality in my own house. In his last months I cleaned up Pinky's accidents as fast as I worked to ignore their cause: the wasting away of his internal organs. When he could no longer stand, my imagination toyed with the idea of injections that might stay the decay, thus deflecting images of myself some day that is now sooner than later. We hoped we would discover that Pinky had died in his sleep.

We talked little of euthanasia until the morning we could no longer avoid it. To keep a suffering animal alive, propped up by medical artifice, seemed to us cruel and self-serving. But placing a beloved friend beyond misery's reach required our consent to destroy him. "First, do no harm," insisted Hippocrates and, later, Christian thinkers. For us there was no available option that did not harm. We cried because death remains that bastard on the throne until all things are subjected to the sovereignty of the Lord of the universe.

Darwinians say that over 15,000 years of selective domestication have culminated in dogs' adoption of human habits. I wonder if the process operates in reverse. Did my dog, over 16 years, "caninize" me, helping me become more doglike and in the process more Christlike? According to Robert Benchley, "a dog teaches a boy fidelity, perseverance, and to turn around three times before lying down." Pinky taught me more than that. From him I learned adaptability. It could not have been easy for a working dog, bred for nonstop physical activity, to settle into indoor domesticity, but Pinky did it, reminding me that there are things more important than the stubbornness of demanding my way. He depended on Harriet and me to feed and care for him in ways that, in his changed environment, he could not do for himself.

What is our life if not a school for trusting God, as circumstances beyond our control graduate us from helpless infancy to infirm elderliness? I suspect that the Almighty has been using a collie to heighten my compassion for other creatures. Perhaps Pinky's finest lesson for one inclined to depression and anxiety was a holy *joie de vivre*: the unadulterated delight of a brisk walk, a good meal, easy relaxation and a loving touch right now, never minding an unfetchable past and an uncertain future. (See the Sermon on the Mount.) I mourn the loss of a gentle "pedadog" and am grateful for his lessons. That he never intended them makes no difference—my most influential teachers were never aware of what I was learning from them.

Just after Pinky's death several friends sent us an anonymous consolation called *Rainbow Bridge*: a fable about a place "this side of heaven" where dead pets romp together until the day they are reunited, "never to be parted again," with humans who loved them. Though steeped in Hallmark sentimentality, some things in this story chime with the scripture I am employed to study and teach. The Bible ventures little about the souls of the departed, human or animal, but Psalm 148 is fearless in summoning all creation—angels, sun and moon and stars, deep-sea monsters and winging birds, fire and frost, hills and forests, princes and peoples, young and old—to praise the Lord. Extolling Israel's God is not humanity's exclusive prerogative. Who's to say that God does not accept the bark of a border collie as praise?

The story also envisions a cosmic restoration of all that has been ruptured—akin to God's postdiluvian promise to Noah in Genesis and the divine contract, in Hosea, with beasts of the field—and a postmortem reconciliation of all creatures, resonant with Paul's claim in Romans that God is everything's source, means and destination.

Crossing the Rainbow Bridge into eternity is a way of expressing the Song of Solomon's conviction that "love is fierce as death" and Easter's evangel that death is finally feeble than God's perfecting love. Death, thou shalt die.

Meanwhile, shamelessly and with a love that can come only from the heart of God, I weep for the loss of a companion constant until death. Rest in peace, Pinky.