

**Pet Remembrance Candle Lighting Ceremony  
March 4, 2012**

**Remarks by Rev. Bonnie J. Berger**

I am so grateful, and indeed humbled to be invited back to offer remarks at this amazing ceremony. Dr. Krisi is one of the most compassionate and loving veterinary professionals that I have ever encountered, and this community is truly fortunate to have her.

When I was here two years ago, I spoke to you about two very special cats that I was blessed to have in my life, Ming Toi and Tabby. Each one of them gave so much to me and made my life fuller and more grace-filled. Though it has been thirty-four years since Ming passed, and eight since Tabby left, I hold each of them in a special and sacred place in my heart.

Now, I have Lillith, also known as Lilli, in my life. She is a Shih Tzu with attitude (though, does anyone know a Shih Tzu who doesn't have attitude?), and she brings me immense pleasure. And, the thing is, she will never replace Ming or Tabby. Pets are not interchangeable. They are all separate, different individuals with unique personalities. Would we ever say that another human has replaced someone in our life who has passed? I tend to doubt it. What Lilli does is give me a reason everyday to expand my heart. She invites me everyday to live life with spontaneity and with joy and with delight. To enjoy a savory smell, sit spellbound at the sight of a busy squirrel, or offer a greeting to a passerby.

Our beloved animal companions have many traits that we humans could replicate. They are our teachers. For example, our pets are non-judgmental. They don't care

what we look like, what our job is, what kind of car we drive, or who we know. Our pets give us unconditional love. Their expectations are limited to meal time and potty breaks. They are here simply to give and receive love. How many humans would be satisfied with only a well-placed scratch behind their ears, or some smelly fish treat as a sign of being loved? And don't even get me started on my doggie's beloved bully sticks... Whoever came up with those??? And, a final trait that our pets demonstrate to us is always offering us forgiveness. We can yell at them for pooping in the house, and they love and forgive us (it's us that probably need to work on forgiveness for THAT). We can be late with feeding them, and they love and forgive us. We can unintentionally (or intentionally) kick them off our beds, and they love and forgive us.

A month or so ago there was a You Tube video making its way through the social media. It showed a dog that had been rescued and was cowering in the corner of an animal hospital. Different techs approached it with nets and extended collars, and the dog barked and was absolutely terrified. The dog was shaking, whining, and whimpering. Then one tech came forward, sat down, and extended his hand in a loving and tender way. The dog slowly approached and climbed onto the man's lap to be embraced in his arms. Who knows what trauma this dog suffered at the hands of a human? And yet, another human—a stranger—offered his hand and the dog accepted the gesture. What an amazing moment of trust and courage. Yes, we can learn a lot from our animal teachers. Being non-judgmental. Offering unconditional love. Choosing forgiveness. What a better world it would be if we lived this as they do!

So, when we lose a pet, we are losing one of our most important life supports and one of our greatest teachers. Some people don't understand this, and that's why it

is common to hear remarks such as “It’s only a pet,” “Just get another one,” or “Get over it already” all comments suggesting that there must be something wrong with you the way you are living your loss.

We who have loved and been loved by a pet know different. People who have strong feelings about the loss of a pet have them because they are capable of intimate attachments and deep emotional bonding. This is something to be proud of, not something to hold in suspicion.

Tonight we gather together as a community to remember our pets. We are, together, performing a ritual that gives honor and a name to those beings who were important in our life. Author Teresa Wagner has this to say about the use of ritual, “Rituals to mark the death of an animal loved one help us honor the animal, honor the primary grievers, and honor the relationship itself between the animal and all who loved him or her. Rituals can make the real love of the relationship and the importance of the death and our grief more real and legitimate, something most cultures don't do for us automatically when an animal dies, as is done when a human dies.”

As you find comfort tonight in this candle-lighting ritual, I would encourage each of you, if you are so inclined, to think about continuing the use of ritual as a way to keep your pets memory alive and to find healing and peace in those memories. Perhaps your individual faith tradition has some memorial elements that you can use to remember your animal companion. For example, in Judaism, on the yearly anniversary of a death, a Yartzheit or memorial candle is lit. These candles, available in the kosher section of the grocery store, burn for 24 hours. Place the candle in a spot where it is visible to you. Allow the light to bring forth the

wonderful times you had with you pet, and to bring peace to your heart of a life well loved and cared for.

Other faith traditions use altars to remember people who have passed. Place a picture of your pet, perhaps their collar or favorite toy in a special place. Make a photo album or scrapbook to put there as well. If you have your pets ashes in an urn, that might be just the place to keep it.

Other ideas for rituals include planting a tree or bush on their favorite outdoor spot or flowers that bloom every year, or if that is not possible, dedicate an indoor flowering plant to your pet. Start a gratitude journal and write about all of the ways your animal added value to your life.

Or, plan a memorial service if you have never done so. It doesn't matter if your pet died last week, last year, or a decade ago. If you feel moved to have a service—just do it. The service, much like this evenings, can include readings, music, poems, prayers, pictures, and eulogies, or it can be very short and simple. You can do it privately or invite friends to join you. Again, the purpose of the ritual or service is to honor the animal who has died, to honor the primary grievers, and to honor the relationship. Memorial services and rituals provide a place for us to give testimony to the sacred love shared between our animals and us.

I will close with some thoughts from the book [The Inner Voice of Love](#) by Henri Nouwen. I have excerpted parts of his essay “Love Deeply”.

“Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply.

You might be afraid of the pain that deep love can cause. When

those you love deeply reject you, leave you, or die, your heart will be broken. But that should not hold you back from loving deeply. The pain that comes from deep love makes your love ever more fruitful. It is like a plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to take root and grow into a strong plant. Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence, or death, you are faced with a choice. You can become bitter and decide not to love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds.

The more you have loved the more you will be able to let your heart grow wider and deeper. When your love is truly giving and receiving, those whom you love will not leave your heart even when they depart from you. They will become part of your self and thus gradually build a community within you.”

May you continue to give and receive love deeply. May the loss of your beloved pet expand and grow new love in your heart. And may your pets memory always be a blessing to you.