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Sesame Family Newsletter

December 12, 2007

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A Dog's Life...and Death

by Jordan Brown

A family bids farewell to a furry friend.

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A DOGGONE CONVERSATION

On a snowy afternoon in December, my daughter Olivia (age 3) and I are playing in the produce section of the supermarket. A friendly, frail, white-haired woman comes over to say hi. Ever since my daughter was an infant, she has been intensely social, eager to make friends in public places. She flashes a coy smile at the elderly shopper and inquires, "What's YOUR name? I'm Olivia!" The woman grins back, and says her name is Evelyn. She then asks Olivia how old she is. My daughter reveals her age, and then announces, "My dog is buried." The woman is startled, and asks Olivia to repeat what she just said. Olivia responds matter-of-factly: "We buried 'Mo. He's not alive anymore." The woman sweetly responds, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Nice to meet you, Olivia" -- then makes a beeline for the checkout. Clearly, this woman had come to the market to buy groceries, not be re-minded of her mortality by a perky 3-year-old.

Olivia's mentioning 'Mo surprises me, too. It has been nearly two months since we buried our beloved cocker spaniel Satchmo ('Mo for short). While I continue to mourn his loss daily, I did not realize that this was something that Olivia thought about, too. My children spend so much time living "in the moment" that I sometimes forget the influence of their "inner life." The passing of our dear pet is obviously something that is still on Olivia's mind.



FRANK

A dead and gone dog provides an emotional purge valve.

GRIEF

Our experts explore how children cope with loss.

HOW PRESCHOOLERS MOURN

Language helps little ones cope.

A NEED TO GRIEVE

For older children, a deeper sense of sadness.

THE LATE GREAT 'MO

Before I tell you about the fateful day that prompted Olivia's comment in the supermarket, I'd like to reflect on 'Mo's life -- and the profound impact he had on our family...

Fourteen years ago, when I was 29 (hey, stop doing the math to figure out my current age! And don't you dare figure out my age in "dog years!"), my wife Ellen and I decided to adopt a dog. This was long before our first child was born, and we were eager to expand our family. Having grown up with dogs, I knew how wonderful the experience could be. Living in a small apartment, Ellen and I were determined to find a cute little "lap dog." After visiting five shelters, we were discouraged. Then, in the sixth shelter, sitting in a cage, looking even more dejected than us, was a very sweet but very LARGE, semi-neurotic, blonde cocker spaniel. (If he were to become a "lap dog," I knew I'd need a much bigger lap.) The people who ran the shelter let us take him for a trial walk. The bond was instantaneous. On the taxi ride home, we brainstormed names, and settled on the nickname of one of our favorite musicians Louis Armstrong -- Satchmo (see right for his photo).

For the next six years, Satchmo became an integral member of our family. Our lives revolved around walking him 4 to 5 times a day, feeding him, taking him to the local "dog run" to socialize, giving him baths, clipping his nails, and so on.

In 2001, our son Finn was born. Shortly beforehand, other pet-owners reminded us to be sensitive to 'Mo's feelings. While Ellen and I were already aware that dogs can behave aggressively toward young children (especially ones that yank on their ears), we were relieved and delighted that Mo got along famously with our children. For more about 'Mo's impact on Finn (and vice versa), you can read my earlier Sesame Family Newsletter, "The Joy of Pets" (see link on right).

By the time Olivia was born in 2004, 'Mo, now an older dog, was very mellow, and even more tolerant about the "explorations" of a curious infant. Because Ellen and I were careful to warn Finn about bothering the dog, Finn became an excellent teacher for Olivia, modeling safe ways of playing with 'Mo. Nothing thrilled our dog more than having someone throw a tennis ball for him to retrieve.



[THE JOY OF PETS](#)

A father celebrates the bond between his son and dog.

[KIDS' BEST FRIEND?](#)

Family dogs may pose a real threat.

[THROUGH THE YEARS: PETS](#)

Enhancing the lives of you and your children.

[THE CRITTER CONNECTION](#)

To get the right pet for your preschooler, here's what you must know.

A FAREWELL PARTY

A few months ago, 'Mo's back legs gave out. We took him to the vet, and after a variety of tests, she determined there was nothing we could do. When I asked how much time he had, she said she didn't know. 'Mo didn't seem to be in pain, and was otherwise in good health, so we made the best of a difficult situation. We had to carry 'Mo up and down stairs, and propped up his food dish so he wouldn't have to lean down so far. I wondered if he missed doing his favorite thing in the whole world -- chasing tennis balls. Finn made a valiant effort to give 'Mo tiny little tennis ball tosses...and 'Mo would drag himself over to the nearby balls and give them back to Finn. Olivia would pick up one of her toy dogs, carry him up the stairs, and explain, "His back legs don't work, Daddy."

I wondered sadly when the day would come that we'd have to put him down. I called my sister Sharon -- a vet and owner of numerous pets over the years -- for advice. I asked, "How do you know when its time?" She suggested that I make two lists -- one of the things that Satchmo enjoys that he can still do, and another of things that Satchmo used to enjoy, but can no longer do by himself. On the first list, I wrote things like "eat" "wag his tail" and "drag himself around." On the second list, I wrote, "chase balls" "run" "climb stairs" "poop or pee without help."

Sharon explained that sometimes when you're living day to day with a sick or dying pet, you don't notice the changes, or see the decline in the animal's quality of life. By making these lists, and dating them, you can easily see how the pet's quality of life is changing and how quickly. Eventually, once the items on the second list become more significant than the first list, it is time to consider ending the animal's life for humane reasons.

Then I noticed the sores. Our dog's dragging himself around with his front legs had caused him to develop sores on his elbows and on the end of his little cocker tail. In addition, "accidents" were increasing to the point where I had to bathe him several times a day. We had to face the harsh reality: 'Mo's quality of life was no longer what it was. It was time to get ready for the inevitable. I called the vet to schedule his "euthanization."

The night before, we decided to have a party to celebrate 'Mo's life. We made it kind of a birthday party. After all, he'd lived for 14 years -- about 100 human years. With as much joy as 'Mo could muster, he gobbled down his favorite people food: steak, macaroni and cheese, broccoli, and even ice cream.

The next morning, while Finn and Olivia were in school, and Ellen was at work, I took 'Mo to our vet, known throughout our community simply as "Dr. Kate." As I stroked his fur tenderly and told him I loved him, Dr. Kate gave 'Mo two injections: the first put him into a very deep sleep (so deep, I discovered that his tongue stuck way out of his mouth!); the second shot quickly and painlessly stopped his heart. I explained that we wanted to bury 'Mo on our property in a woodsy area. She helped me put our dog in a plastic bag, and carried him out to my car. That night, our family gathered around the plot I'd dug the day before and put his body into the ground along with a bunch of his old tennis balls. It was one of the hardest days of my life. A month later, we put down a gravestone that said, "Satchmo, Our Loyal Friend."

ANOTHER PET?

"Let's get a new dog!" Olivia announced recently in the car on a family trip. "A big white one!" Finn agreed that getting another dog would be "really awesome." He is also excited about the prospect of getting a turtle, a hamster or a lobster. ("Hey, Daddy, first we could play with him -- and then eat him!") While I'm sure we'll get another pet or two some day, our hands are full dealing with the demands of our human family members.

While saying goodbye to a pet can be a heart-wrenching experience, sharing your life with an animal can be a marvelously interesting and life-affirming experience.



[BAD NEWS PETS](#)

Iguanas, turtles, and other reptiles pose serious health risks for young children, babies, and fetuses.

Jordan Brown
Sesame Workshop

GAMES & MORE: PETS ROCK!

Play with the pets of Sesame Street.

- [Zoe's Pet Shelter](#)
Sort Pets with Zoe.
- [Zoe's Fish Bowl](#)
Connect the dots from 1 to 10.
- [Elmo's World: Walking the Dogs](#)
Help Mr. Noodle walk the dogs.
- [Barkley Coloring Page](#)
Print and color everyone's favorite dog.

WEEKLY TRIVIA

In addition to his pet turtle, Big Bird takes care of someone else--his special teddy bear. What is the name of Big Bird's bear?

- A. Hooper
- B. Big Bear
- C. Honker
- D. Radar

Pencils down! If you guessed D, you're right! Big Bird's beloved bear is named Radar.

FROM THE WORKSHOP



wishes you hope, peace and joy!



[Click here to view our special holiday message](#) -- and, [send a Sesame Street-themed, non-denominational, Holiday E-Card](#) to a friend or loved one -- it's free.

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP



Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit educational organization making a meaningful difference in children's lives around the world. Founded in 1968, the Workshop changed television forever with the legendary Sesame Street. Today, the Workshop continues to innovate on behalf of children in 120 countries, using its proprietary research methodology to ensure its programs and products are engaging and enriching. Sesame Workshop is behind award-winning programs like Dragon Tales and Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat, Pinky Dinky Doo and ground breaking multimedia productions in South Africa, Egypt and Russia. As a nonprofit, Sesame Workshop puts the proceeds it receives from sales of Sesame Street, Dragon Tales and Sagwa products right back into its educational projects for children around the world. Find the Workshop online at www.sesameworkshop.org.

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