

## **On the Positive Side**

### **Responsibility to pets stretches beyond food and shelter**

**By Dr. Judy Long For the Sun-News**

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People use language to describe the joys of living with pets; animals just act it out. Our pets give us tremendous security as we experience their "unconditional love." There are guaranteed giggles when our pets perform their little routines. Sometimes we've taught them tricks, and sometimes they invent their own.

My greyhounds do "loony tunes" every day at dusk: they run from one end of the house to the other, execute whipsaw turns and repeat. Then they run in circles, the forefeet catching up with the tail in those tight circles only greyhounds can do.

By law, we are obliged to feed and shelter our pets and to refrain from abusing them. Other expectations also develop between people and animals. Meeting those expectations gives mutual pleasure. Humans learn the rewards of caring for another creature. Animals, on their side, trust that we will truly be responsible.

There is confidence in the way the cat taps the drawer where her brush is kept at the same time every day. There is trust in the way the dog fetches his lead to his human and waits politely for his walk.

Humans expect animals to learn our language. Today, researchers are belatedly trying to decipher animal languages. But all this time, people have been reporting that their animals talk to them. Cats are known to talk to their owners, with purpose and intention. Our dog Stella follows her boss-man around the house, murmuring in a conversational tone and clearly expecting a dialogue.

We care for our animals when they are sick. We are proud that we can help, and our animals trust us to help. We learn to administer medication or give injections. There is tenderness in treating an abscess or pilling an animal that will barely stand for it.

Life with companion animals is rich, and it is lived in the present. Ordinarily, we don't think of the end of life. As responsible pet owners we know, in the abstract, that we will have the responsibility of making the judgment when that life will come to an end, and oversee the moment.

Sometimes death comes gradually, as we get used to dealing with chronic conditions that may be life-limiting or life-threatening. Sometimes the moment comes suddenly. As always, the animal will try to let you know. Even when there's no evident pain or trauma, when your pet stops eating, that may be a sign he is shutting down. When you observe lassitude in an ordinarily lively animal, that's a signal too. When your pet alters his routines, shows no interest in going out or taking a walk, sound the alarm. Vomiting, bloody stools, fever are emergency messages - get to your veterinarian.

The period between the signal and the decision is when you are grappling with the first pangs of loss. It may be days or only hours, but it is a period out of time, and it is excruciating.

People find many ways to deal with their grief. What I am saying is that grief has to wait for a little time. No matter how painful, we must live up to our responsibility. I am aware that some pet owners give the euthanasia instruction and depart. Some who have gone through this kind of loss swear they will never have another pet.

If your pet is suffering, your decision must come soon. Our responsibility does not end until we see our pet out and the suffering is ended. This usually means staying with our animal as she is "put to sleep." She should be able to count on our reassuring touch and familiar voice as she passes through into the unknown.

Judy Long is a retired sociologist and board member of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico.