More than a “Stupid Fish”

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Journal of Animal Ethics, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring 2019, pp. v-vii (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press

FROM THE EDITORS

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In April 2009, the *New York Times* Modern Love Column, one of our favorites, published a piece entitled "Just One Last Swirl Around the Bowl" by Dan Barry. It recounts the story of his daughter Grace's dying goldfish, John Cronin the Fish, named after her cousin. The piece was then turned into a podcast, for *Modern Love the Podcast*, in January 2016, in which the column was discussed by Barry, Grace, the editor of the Modern Love column, Daniel Jones, and the presenter of the podcast Meghna Chakrabarti.

The column explores the impending death of John Cronin, but relates it to other issues of mortality, such as the loss of Barry's parents and his own brush with mortality. The telling description in iTunes of the episode reads: "Jason Alexander narrates this story about a man projecting his deepest thoughts of mortality onto his pet fish" (Sivertson, 2016). As Barry recounts trying to get John Cronin to eat, it reminds him of the same struggle with his aging parents: "'You stupid fish,' I hiss. 'Eat'" (Barry, 2009). Yet while Barry relates the struggle to other ideas of mortality, he nonetheless reveals a genuine, if surprising to him, attachment to the goldfish. He writes,

> For the record, I am a fish person only in the sense that I like to eat them, exposing me, I suppose, to some critical filleting. Then why have I become emotionally attached to a pocket-size creature that lives in a cocoon of water? It does not sleep in my lap. We do not play fetch. Never once have I taken it for a walk or even a swim. A satisfactory answer evades me. (Barry 2009)

The nature of his attachment to John Cronin is only explored in the column as relating to reflections on human mortality and grief. He expresses surprise in the subsequent interview—he cannot seem to explain why he is having an emotional reaction to the death of the fish. Instead he concludes, "it was really about mortality and trying to hold onto people we love" (Sivertson, 2016).

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Without diminishing the pain of the human mortality issues reflected upon in the column, it seems that something is being missed in this discussion, namely, the love and concern for the fish John Cronin himself. This is out of sync with a column that is normally full of wonderful articulations of complex emotions.

In the subsequent podcast, the editor of the column Daniel Jones, reveals why he chose Barry's submission. He indicates that he said "no" to many other submissions about the loss of or love for companion animals. "Memorialising lost pets . . . [is] pretty much a no from the get go." His initial reaction to the start of the piece was dismissive, but he selected it in the end because "of course this piece becomes about so much more than this goldfish and just becomes deeper and more complicated and more moving. And it's one of my favourite pieces that we have ever run in the column" (Sivertson, 2016). However, in emphasising the wider themes of the piece, something very real is lost—the connection to and love of a fish companion.

Moreover, an opportunity is lost to discuss the problem of how to grieve for companion animals. The subject of a funeral for John Cronin the Fish was raised in the podcast, to which Barry replied "As I remember it, it [the funeral] was the traditional way, down a porcelain chute into the next world." To which both Barry and Chakrabarti laughed. Chakrabarti then asks Grace what she thought of that, to which she replied "I remember asking my Dad to say a speech over the toilet"—a comment that is met with more laughter. At which point Barry interjected with "I think everybody wept," followed by more nervous laughter (Sivertson, 2016). The nervous laughter is telling as it reveals the discomfort in not knowing how to appropriately grieve for companion animals. This is true from the kind of funeral or burial undertaken, from the lack of words to mark the occasion, and in the ability to discuss this grief with others. Grief at the death of a companion animal is socially isolating as the general response, as recounted in another article is: "Get over it already. He was just a dog. Isn't one as good as another?" (Yonan, 2012).

Indeed psychological studies have revealed that grief for a companion, albeit often dismissed socially, has a profound impact upon carers. One study suggested that more than 85% of companion animal carers report grief symptoms at the death of a companion, and over one-third have experienced continuing grief for at least six months (Wrobel and Dye, 2003). Another study suggests that some carers experience grief as poignantly as with the loss of a human family member (Toray, 2004).

Not only is more social acceptance for grief over the loss of a companion animal required, we need rites, rituals, and language to help mark their passing. John Cronin's porcelain funeral could have provided a great deal more comfort and closure, if he had found some words to mark the occasion. One of us has written such a book, for occasions such as this (Linzey, 2015).

Yet the profound love and care for John Cronin the fish is tellingly revealed when the presenter asks if they have gotten a new fish. To which Grace replies, "no I never got another fish." Barry adds, "we couldn't go through the trauma, but we have a black lab[rador]" (Sivertson, 2016). The column may have been about dealing with mortality

and love, but it was also about the close human–animal bond between this family and their fish—so strong, that they could not bear the "trauma" of having another. Of course the question is: Why should we be so embarrassed about loving other animals and grieving when they die?

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