

Bill Rea ? Hard to have pets die

Those of you who listen regularly to Newstalk 1010 (it used to be known as CFRB) will be familiar with the talk show host Jerry Agar.

He, last Thursday, did a commentary that would bring tears to the eyes of just about anyone, because he was talking about the death of his dog; a 12-year-old golden retriever. One could sense the emotion in his voice as he described how his daughter slept one night last week on the floor next to the dog; something I could relate to, and will get to presently.

I am aware of other examples like that.

Some 20 years ago, I was editing papers in Toronto, focusing mainly on East York (this was before Mike Harris abolished East York). The mayor of East York was Michael Prue, and he submitted columns (every two weeks, if memory serves), addressing various municipal issues. Yet there was the one occasion when he used the space to reflect on the ordeal of having to have his dog put down. I was talking to him later that week, and he reflected that he had been writing about significant issues, like taxes and development, and received little reaction. Yet the piece about his dog had prompted strangers to come up to him offering condolences.

Many of us, myself included, share our homes with certain animal friends. Having married a cat lover, cats have been part of my life for the last 19 years. Two cats have left us during that time, and it hit me straight in the gut both times. Beth will only go so long without a cat, so we have had Ella since early 2014.

Ella has become part of my life.

I was raised in a house that had dogs. For several years we had two; both dachshunds (a female and one of her pups). Penny and Kingo (pronounced ?King-Oh?) were their names. Penny left us, and then Kingo went almost exactly a year later. Our house was a dog-free zone for approximately 48 hours. We brought home a dachshund puppy, about 15 weeks old, and we named him Kurt. There was a certain practicality to all this. My father was travelling on business a lot in those days, frequently in various places in Europe for a month at a time. He decreed, in a way husbands and fathers were allowed to decree on those days, that if he was going to be away from home so much, there was going to be dog in the house.

I think there was another motive. Kingo had been put down in the morning, and for some reason, Dad wore his sunglasses while he ate his lunch that day.

In terms of security, there's no doubt that Kurt was up to the task. With the family, he was always a big suck. But the house and surrounding property was his turf, and people and other animals stepped on his turf without authorization at their peril. He could bite when he got excited, and I will carry a scar on my right cheek for the rest of my life as proof of that (our rough-housing went a little too far one day).

It might strike an odd note for some that a dachshund could be an effective watchdog. They just aren't that big or threatening looking.

On the other hand, they are spunky (Kurt certainly was), they make a lot of noise when they are disturbed (burglars hate that) and they will fight to defend their meal ticket.

Kurt also benefitted from the fact he got a lot of exercise, and had a controlled diet. He was pretty agile for most of his life.

He did earn his keep, but time takes its toll on dogs a lot faster than it does on people.

Penny and Kingo both lasted 12 years, and Kurt lived to see his 16th birthday, but we all knew there was a bad day to come.

His aggressiveness slowed. He stopped being very mobile. He really wasn't much of a watchdog any more, but it had been a long time since my father had gone away on business trips.

As things progressed, there was a certain amount of expectation. My father had seen an article in a newspaper, written from the point of view of a dog, asking that when he was old and no longer having fun, that perhaps his trusted and beloved friends should help bring things to their inevitable conclusion (I confess reflecting on that memory meant it took me while to type that last sentence, because I had to keep pausing to get tears from my eyes). Dad wondered if we were being cruel keeping Kurt alive. I started hoping that nature would intervene, and that we would come down some morning and just find that Kurt had gone.

Late one night, I woke up hearing forlorn cries that quickly drew me to the conclusion that Kurt was in distress. I grabbed my pillow and went downstairs to the kitchen, where his bed was. I stretched out next to the bed and rested my hand near his nose so he could pick up my scent. It worked. He knew he was not alone. He calmed down and was snoozing within half an hour.

That's why I relate to the story Agar told of his daughter.

Dad took Kurt to the vet later that morning. I saw the bill afterwards, with three handwritten words; ?Euthanasia and disposal.?

I think the bill was deliberately left out so I would see it.

Dad didn't bother with the sunglasses when I got home that night as he confirmed that Kurt was gone. My mother later told me that his tears eventually came in her presence.

It was around that time that my father reflected that this was one of the downsides of having a pet.

?True,? I replied, ?but I think we come out ahead in the long run.?

I got no argument.

As Agar concluded his commentary, ?We miss him, and life goes on.?

