

## Losing a friend, a piece of ourselves

by Mark Pavilons

Our home is a bit quieter than usual.

It's a strange silence, where you know something isn't right.

Our 14-year-old Lab Marley is no longer with us. For dogs, that's a heck of a life, roughly equivalent to 98 human years!

We don't really "own" our best friends but merely "rent" them. We all hope for a long "lease."

Saying goodbye to a four-legged family member is never easy, and I'm sure most pet owners will attest to that. They may not be our whole lives, but they do make our lives whole.

We love our animals with all of our hearts and believe they'll always be with us, even though their lifespans are relatively short.

"Such short little lives our pets have to spend with us, and they spend most of it waiting for us to come home each day," John Grogan said.

Even when our beloved pets get old, we don't want to say goodbye. We're never ready for the inevitable.

These things, however, aren't really in our hands.

Perhaps Marley knew, long before we did, the end was near. There were a few occasions when she looked at me with an unusual stare, as if to say "I've had enough." I felt it.

We humans have such power over our pets and yet, we are often helpless.

At the end, in our home filled with loved ones, we said farewell as she quietly slipped away. The tears flowed, joined by sorrow, and plenty of what-ifs.

Vets always tell us it's the humane thing to do. When a dog no longer has the ability to walk, run and play, or even stand at their bowls to eat, their quality of life is gone. They are merely existing, moving through the fog, from one day to the next.

They can't vocalize and tell us about their aches and pains. At 14, Marley likely had many.

Her back legs were strained and she lost the ability to stand recently. She became incontinent and had a horrible cough. The vet mentioned Marley was enduring a great deal of pain.

The decision was, really, the only one.

But our furry friends don't fear death as we do, they have no concept of it. I'm sure as she drifted away from Earth, she felt at ease. For all we know, as she crossed over, she may have thought she'd see us all the very next day.

I read that it was important that her last sights and sounds were of her family members "our faces and voices. I hope she carried these images with her and know that we loved her dearly.

Maybe her final thoughts turned to grassy fields, chasing balls and swimming in a lake. Perhaps, finally, she was once again

bright-eyed and bushy tailed in the white light that welcomed her.

I have a keen interest in the afterlife and watch all shows, movies and documentaries on the subject. Many contend that while we are separated from our bodies, our souls are everlasting. And since dogs are allowed in Heaven, I'm sure the same holds true for them.

One of my favourite original Twilight Zone episodes is of a man who drowns trying to save his dog in a river. As the duo walk down the country path searching for the Pearly Gates, the first gatekeeper welcomes them, but says dogs aren't allowed. The man found this odd, so he continued on his way, only to find the true entrance to Heaven, where he and his dog were welcomed. The first gate was, of course, Hell. A timeless tale, indeed.

For Kim and I, Marley was our second dog together. Kim searched for a breeder and we picked her out of a litter of energetic, cute-as-a-button critters. Great lines, it appears. We got her sister Lola from the same breeder. We've since added two more sisters, a pair of year-old Belgian Malinois (mixed with Boxer) herding dogs.

Yes, we have a full house.

At first, we see them as cuddly, living stuffed toys. We get them to fill a need, perhaps even a selfish one.

But what happens is quite remarkable. A bond develops between human and dog that can't really be explained. It's a deep, heart-felt connection that defies the human condition.

Our dogs just accept us. Who would put up with us, ignore our irrational behaviour and still kiss our faces at the end of the night? Our dogs. Who would nudge their noses at us, refuse to let go of their chew toys, still wagging their tails? Our dogs. Who would stick by our side, through thick and thin, until death do us part? Our dogs.

Pet owners all say they can't imagine their lives without one of these companions by our side, under our feet, or stealing our sandwich off the counter. One of new puppies ate an entire breakfast serving of bacon that I left too close to the edge!

As our pets age, we try not to notice their frailties, and inabilities. They demand patience, at every stage, but especially as they age.

Everyone in the family had to exercise plenty of patience as Marley struggled. We had to use lift straps to carry her from her bowl to the door to her bed.

My wife doted over her for weeks, straining her own arms, shoulders and back in the process.

She broke her ankle just last week slipping on ice at the back door with dog in tow. My ever-compassionate spouse would do anything, for anyone, to her own detriment. She should be right as rain in four to six weeks!

We all had very heavy hearts ?? dark, dreary, soul-draining feeling ? in the days leading up to the final farewell.

Goodbye Marley ??ur playmate, confidant, soccer player, garbage disposal, sentry, welcome mat, friend, comforter and foot licker.

We will all miss her dearly.

?It came to me that every time I lose a dog, they take a piece of my heart with them, and every new dog that comes into my life gifts me with a piece of their heart. If I live long enough, all of the components of my heart will be dog, and I will become as generous and as loving as they are.??nonymous