

THE CONSCIOUS MOTHER

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Musings on death with dignity

Writing about death is not fun for me. Guess that's why I don't write about it. I select topics that I think are fun or interesting or topics that I am struggling through in the hopes that someone can relate, so my struggles aren't for naught.

Death is not a fun topic and I have gotten up out of my chair about a half dozen times, hoping this column will magically write itself. Writing about the death of a beloved pet is a topic other families have faced or could be facing at this very moment. It still doesn't make writing about it any easier, though.

Time to face it in the form of our 15-year-old cat, Salina.

Fortunately, my 11-year-old son, Alex, was not familiar with death. He lost his great-grandmother a couple of years ago, but since he only saw her a few times in his life, and she died at 96, he was not devastated.

He had a baby Praying Mantis for about four weeks and although its death made Alex sad, he was able to move forward. We had a little memorial for the bug and that helped Alex bring closure to its life. Children are so resilient; I think it's because they are so in-the-moment.

The difference with Salina's death is that Alex had known Salina his entire life. This was a more difficult death to grieve, but fortunately since her death was planned, it helped us prepare.

Salina had been suffering with kidney disease for some time, and in the last few months her health was in such a state of decline that we decided to end her suffering. This was a very difficult decision to make and one that was fraught with anxiety, guilt and sadness. It is sad enough to have a pet pass away, but it is a completely different type of event when the decision is made to help that animal pass.

My husband, John, and I were hoping she would die on her own accord, in her own way, but Salina was a tough old cat and she continued to plod along. We talked with the vet about bringing Alex with us. Initially he wanted to go, but we were not sure if this was a good idea. Ultimately Alex decided not to go and I think that was a better choice for him.

Once we made the decision to take Salina to the vet, we decided to remember Salina's life by watching old videos in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the younger, wilder black cat. We have hours and hours of Alex on video, and every so often the cat would mosey into the room, or be the featured attraction.

Seeing Salina in her younger, healthier years helped us acknowledge that not only was Salina elderly, she was ill. Watching the videos helped us celebrate her life, rather than focus on her impending death. Since Salina had never been ill until the kidney disease set in, I was in complete denial she was even sick.

I guess I just kept hoping she would magically get better and eventually just die of old age, quietly and peacefully. On the other hand, I was also concerned the end of her life would be filled with pain and suffering. In reality, she was not getting better and we did not want her to continue to suffer.

The day Salina died was a very long and sad one for all of us. Salina's passing was painless and quiet, save for my telling her what a great kitty she was and how much we loved her. Throughout the day we grieved alone and together, but we made it though that day.

If there is one thing death is good at, it is to remind us about life; we don't think about life because we are too busy living it. And that's the way it should be. But when forced to face the death of a loved one, it touches the very core of our existence.

We kept telling each other Salina had a great life, was loved dearly, spoiled rotten, and had a death with dignity. Each day has gotten a little easier.

While we miss her, all we need do is look around at all the upholstered furniture and be reminded of our beloved cat.

When she was alive, I used to yell at her to stop ruining my furniture. Now I just smile at the wonderful memory of the terror that she was.