

A Love Story

Sophia and I got together when I turned twenty and she was a 6-week old lab-dalmation mix pup nursing on her mother at an animal shelter. Mom was a pure-bred dalmation who had an unexpected (at least to her owner) meeting with a black lab.

Sophia and I grew up together. She was my companion through my early adult years. By the time she was 17 and I was 37, she was getting a bit rickety. The beginning of the end was when I took her to visit a health practitioner who did energy balancing for people. After she treated Sophia she said to me, "You need to get very clear on whether Sophia is here because she wants to be or because you want her to stay." This advice stayed with me and about a week later, I got a catalogue in the mail. In it was a little book called Animal Talk by Penelope Smith. I instantly picked up the phone and ordered the book. In less than 24 hours it arrived. Never before or since have I had a mail order item appear so quickly.

The book arrived on a beautiful Friday afternoon. The sun was out. I sat outside with Sophia and read some very simple instructions on communicating with animals. Then the magic started. After telling Soph how much I loved her, I asked her what she wanted for herself. To my amazement I heard her speak to me -- telepathically. I'll never forget what she said. It brings tears to my eyes as I write it now. "I want to be out of pain." I didn't hesitate. I called the vet and asked when I could bring her in to be euthanized. (I bless this option that we give our companions and hope someday it is available humans as well.)

I spent the rest of the evening talking with my friend. We covered a lot of ground. We rejoiced in the many good times we'd spent together. I apologized for the many ways in which I wasn't there for her through the years. Her loving, forgiving response washed away my guilt with a gracious ease. I asked her: "What do you want done with your remains?" She asked to be cremated and to stay near me. If there was any doubt left in me whether I was talking with Sophia or talking with myself, this ended it. Never in my wildest imagination had I ever envisioned keeping my dog's ashes much less keeping them near me! I KNOW this was her idea.

That night, I heard her cry from her bed downstairs. She could no longer climb the stairs to sleep in our room. I went to her and slept with her through the night. In the morning, my husband helped me lift her into the back of the car. As I sat with her, I started thinking of all the wonderful times we'd had together through the years. And once again, I heard her voice: "just be with me here and now." That simple message -- be with me in the now -- so profound is one of the most precious gifts Sophia ever gave me. It has served me well on many occasions since her passing.

And it wasn't the last of her parting gifts. When we arrived at the vet, I asked Sophia if she wanted to walk or be carried in since she wasn't very stable on her feet anymore. She wanted to walk and proceeded calmly, happily and with great dignity to her destination. She was so calm about dying! The vet placed her on the table and prepared the syringe.

He asked me to hold her muzzle shut. When I hesitated, he explained that sometimes a dog will bite. While I knew this wouldn't be an issue for Sophia, it clearly was for the vet. So I told Sophia what I was doing and why. The vet said the shot would be painless and I passed this on as well. He placed the needle in her forearm and Soph jumped from surprise and pain. When I asked the vet what happened, he admitted that putting the needle in does hurt a little. I apologized to Soph for misleading her -- let her know the shot itself would hurt but she would feel nothing after that. Reassured, she relaxed in my arms as I held her.

I felt her body still as the drug entered her system. And then, to my amazement, I felt her leave her body. It is as clear to me today, 7 years later, as it was that morning. She rose from her body, no longer encumbered by a worn-out shell. I sensed her running through a huge meadow, as she had at height of her powers -- belly just skimming the ground as she stretched her legs in gleeful play.

She stayed around for a couple days to make sure I was all right. And then she was gone. Her ashes are by my bed and I tell her good night every evening before going to sleep. She stops in from time to time just to say hello. I think of her today as a loving guardian who watches out for me from a different place. While I can no longer hold her, feel her soft fur, her cold and wet nose, I can still talk with her from time to time.

My friend gave me so many gifts. The experience of being loved unconditionally in spite of many thoughtless acts through the years as I learned to be a caring companion...the reminder to live in the moment and feel whatever I'm feeling fully and deeply as I did her during her final hours on this earth...the gracious calm that comes from knowing that death is simply another step...the ability to talk not just with other animals but with trees and rocks that grew from a new openness to this amazing possibility...and perhaps Sophia's greatest gift to me was the unequivocal knowledge that spirit continues beyond this life. Knowing that life and death are a cycle frees me to participate in life more fully because I feel so at peace with death.

Beyond a doubt, Sophia and I have been together before and will be again. That deep connection is a treasure I will hold dear always.