

Thoughts on a little companion, departed:



For those grieving the death of a friend, a family member—a partner—grieving the loss of a pet dog may seem disrespectful. In this most privileged part of the planet it is sobering to be reminded that in much of the world dogs either work for their keep, scrounge— or are regarded as articles of food. Still, with the deepest respect for the universe of suffering and grief, I consider that the death of our Chihuahua was not “just *like* the loss of a family member” but *was* such a loss.

The little dog we called Romeo, shared our lives for 11 ½ years. He originally was a Christmas present for my (then 18-year-old) daughter, MT. A tawny bright-eyed creature no bigger than a ferret and with oversized ears like those of a flying fox—he was instantly adorable. Still, miniature deer-cuteness belied his wolf spirit. In those first few weeks, he was so wild that he darted for cover when anyone but MT tried to pick him up. He did not take well to his first appearances as a fashion accessory among my daughter’s friends. He was apt to growl or even snap at unfamiliar hands eager to pat.

That wildness led to a few close calls in his early years. He chased a raccoon from the garbage bin in the middle of the night and once nonchalantly sniffed at a coyote that had stalked up from behind. Through his whole life he was never quite broken of the tendency to lunge at much larger dogs. (Luckily, most were just too surprised to react in kind). In all those incidents, his loyal masters were able to swoop him up on his harness and thus preserve his conceit that he was always the Alpha male within peeing distance. While in his own reckoning he was scrappier than a Pit Bull, within the family pack he was as tender and devoted as the star-crossed lover of his namesake.

He was somewhat mellowed with neutering. Although relieved of the worry of his nipping strangers and guests, we were a little sad that Romeo would not be able to pass on his blue-ribbon genes. Still, we could not ignore the vet’s warning in the checkup before the spaying: The little dog’s heartbeat indicated a mitral valve prolapse—a defect not uncommon in small breeds. My daughters cried even though assured there was a good chance he would “grow out of it.”

That early warning was soon forgotten with the feistiness of his mature years. Yet even with his huge presence, Romeo remained tiny, barely a kilo and half when full grown. There was always a worry about stepping or rolling over on him but like most little dogs, he was alert and nimble. He was always eager to endlessly ‘hunt’ for his hidden toys and

‘bury’ doggie treats under cushions. He loved to scamper up and down the stairs to fetch his toys then fling them in the air like a terrier with prey. He invariably bristled and barked in hearing the word ‘cat’ and stared attentively at felines on TV— always poised to give chase.

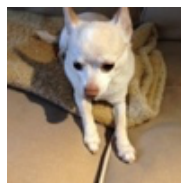
Still, a housebound lap dog he was not. Until his final year, he could scamper tirelessly up steep trails. While every night of life he slept in the bed of a human being, he loved to roll in muck.



In those first years Romeo regarded my eldest daughter, MT, as his official master and he treated my other daughter, TE, and my son, MH, like siblings. I was regarded more as the dominant Alpha of the household—his deference was always mingled with rivalry. Only in the rarest occasions when Romeo challenged the pack leadership— his growl was followed by his rolling over for a belly scratch.

Later on, Romeo grew to adore CM, who came into our lives as my partner. When MT moved out and CM and I set up a household, Romeo gravitated towards CM as his new mistress. Not only was he always partial to women (as his namesake would suggest) but as the primary dish filler, CM became the new center of his devotion.

Over the next 7 years, our ‘pack’ gradually disbanded; first with ‘sister’ TE and then ‘brother’ MH following their older sister in leaving the nest. Left behind were CM, Romeo, and I—moving together towards senior status. Given the life expectancy of Chihuahuas, we looked forward to having Romeo sharing at least the first few years of our retirement.



That was until the onset of his fainting spells.

In the first episode he suddenly collapsed— shaking and unresponsive. It seemed like a stroke—but he recovered completely within a few moments, so we did not take him to the vet. However, over the next few months, the spells recurred with increasing frequency. After bouncing back up the stairs from a long walk or chasing his toys, he would suddenly stagger and fall down. Still, since he bounced so quickly back, we hoped the episode was due only to temporary dehydration or hypoglycemia, a drop in blood sugar— not so serious conditions to which small breeds were prone. Also, given the

upheaval of the household as we prepared to move to a new townhouse at the same time as MH prepared to leave home; we thought Romeo's spells might be stress related. It was only when the fainting episodes were accompanied by fits of coughing and breathing distress that we needed better diagnosis than the Internet afforded.

Our worst suspicions were confirmed when blood tests and an x-ray revealed an enlarged heart and fluid buildup in the lungs. The vet also broke it to us that there were no surgical options for a little dog with chronic heart disease. There was medication which could extend the life of our pet until the drugs' effects were eventually outpaced by the failing heart. But how long would we have? The vet would not commit to an estimate but tellingly only prescribed the medication on a monthly basis.

When we first acquired Romeo, I had told the kids—only half in jest—that inasmuch as I had a lifetime expenditure limit on my own medical insurance, veterinary costs allotted to Romeo would also have a lifetime expense limit. As much as he was cherished, Romeo was not “our child” despite whatever the personalized birthday and Christmas cards from a vet's office would have one believe. Still, when the option came to buy medicine to prolong his life—even in the same world in which children die from lack of clean water—there was no hesitation.

The new routine began late last summer. Twice a day, the loyal CM squirted the syringe of sweetened medicine into Romeo's mouth and mixed a bitter pill into his food, creatively masking the taste. The drugs initially had the desired effect—his lungs cleared and the old Romeo was back—often frisky as a kid on a sugar-high. Still, the diuretic kept the little dog restless through the night. We often had to wake at intervals to take him outside. For the following nine months it was like caring for an infant again.

Yet not once through that daily routine did CM or I ever once think he was a burden. That was especially because the intensity of the little dog's loyalty and affection seemed to deepen as his heart weakened, as I shall momentarily describe.

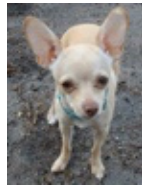
Still aware of the inevitable—we renewed his medications month by month and began to buy his food in smaller quantities. At the same time, we indulged him with gourmet doggie treats—not a great expense for a dog weighing less than a bag of sugar.

There were several crises within those months wherein we thought his time was up. Once he collapsed panting desperately, his legs seemingly paralyzed. I called the girls who tearfully joined us to say their goodbyes. Yet within the hour of their arrival he was back tossing his toy rat and barking with jittery glee—a veritable canine Lazarus.

During his last winter there were whole weeks when he was free of all symptoms. Yet just as hopes were raised that somehow the little heart was strengthening—he would suffer an entire night of coughing and laboured breathing. The whole day after he would lie unresponsive on the sofa...

As he weakened (and his prescription doubled) his borrowed time became more precious. I took more photos and videos of him than usual and consciously relished the closeness when he lay stretched on the sofa or on my chest.

Meanwhile, CM and I began to talk about what we would do when he reached the end. CM was worried that he might suffer: effectively drown in the buildup of fluid in the lungs. Neither of us could bear seeing him paralyzed. At which point would we have to have him put down? A memory of him on the vet's table under the harsh light struggling against a needle seemed too hard to bear. We resolved that he should die at home. Since his body was so small, there would be no need for cremation. We would find some secluded wild place where a tiny grave would not even be noticed...

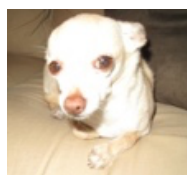


To be ready for that, last fall I searched for a place in the beautiful Minnehada park wherein Romeo himself on numerous times had trodden. I found a spot high on a rocky hillside well away from any of the trails and dug out a tiny recess. When the time came, only the soil would have to be filled in and stones piled over.

We passed our last Christmas together. With both daughters with their boyfriends on hand and my son, MH, back from grad school in Toronto with his girlfriend—the old pack was reunited for the last time.

A month thereafter, I retired from my college job and as part of my new freedom, I was able to take Romeo for daily morning walks. The routine was always the same: in first hearing “time for a walk” he would crawl away. Upon further urging, would slowly make his way step by step to the bottom of the stairs to be harnessed. Once out the door he trotted along briskly to mark the trees, bushes and end of block mailbox he had long claimed as his territory. On return he would wiggle out of the harness at the doorway before leaping up the stairs to toss and chase his toy mouse. To the end he seemed keen to demonstrate his feistiness.

Our last walk together was on a Sunday morning in mid-May. At first, he was hesitant in leaving the house. Yet once outside, his ears twitched up in alertness and his nose shivered. In the park across the road, I unbuckled his harness and let him trot freely across the soccer field. He sniffed the spring air with his usual delight—even though his sides were heaving on the effort of breathing.



The following morning CM started to take him on a walk but came back a moment later, alarmed. She said Romeo could scarcely catch his breath. Through the afternoon he lay wheezing on the sofa, barely raising his head. Worried about leaving him in distress, we brought him with us in his pet carrier when we walked over to visit our daughter, TE, and her fiancé, just 2 blocks away.

The last iPhone photo of Romeo of that evening shows him lying on CM's lap on the patio. The little dog's eyes are barely open.

As soon as we walked back home, we set him on his blanket on the sofa. He lay wheezing, sides pumping to catch a breath. Suddenly, he groaned and yelped then jumped down and stood listless in the middle of the floor. He seemed frustrated by an unshakable weakness. CM then picked him up and took him upstairs to lie on the bed while she folded laundry. A half hour later she came downstairs with Romeo gasping in her arms.

"It's never been this bad," she sobbed.

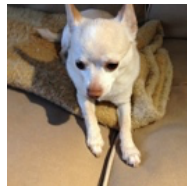
In the usual Alpha role, my first reaction was to exhort him to rally.

"Com'on, Romeo!" I patted him as he twitched and gasped, his eyes shivering and half-closed. "Con'on, calm down."

"He can't," CM whispered, "he's dying."

On the TV was an episode of the early 60s '*Twilight Zone*' series in which a father was attempting to reach through a wall to pull back a child who had disappeared into another dimension. Patting Romeo's quivering head, I could no longer deny that this time there would be no Lazarus restoration, no pulling back from the void.

In those last moments we huddled on the sofa together with Romeo on CM's lap shuddering between us. We gently patted him and whispered the familiar phrases of loyalty and affection. In his final sighing gasp, his neck thrashed weakly and his paws stretched out, claws extended. As the final breath was expelled, his head was curled into CM's neck just as it had been in the very first night he slept between us, welcoming her into the pack...



We wrapped the tiny body in his blanket which was the same tan colour as his fur. We put his well-chewed mouse toy between the paws. We left the forlorn little bundle on the

carpet overnight and woke early to take it up to the secluded spot on the steep hillside of Minnekhada prepared 6 months before...

In the next 2 days, I went back to the little grave three more times. The first time I lifted the rocks to sprinkle Cayenne pepper in order to deter coyotes or bears. In a couple of follow up visits, my daughters accompanied me. To ease our minds of the remote possibility that the grave might arouse suspicion of a still born burial, we left a rain-sealed packet under the rocks. In it was a photo of Romeo and a card, inscribed:

ROMEO (Oct. 2003-May 2015) a loyal, intelligent and loving little Chihuahua who will be forever missed by his family.

We scattered twigs and leaves on the site in further hope that with natural weathering, the little grave would blend into the rock fall and lie undisturbed...



So our 11½-year-old pet dog had died in our arms on a quiet evening in the glorious month of May. He got more time than predicted in his diagnosis and in his last few months received royal treatment. He had been indulged in comfort, rich food and companionship and died with minimal suffering. His final awareness—such as we imagine—was of the devotion of his pack. Although he didn't quite make it to the highest end of Chihuahua life expectancy, he was a clear winner in the canine quality of life cosmic lottery.

So, what was there to grieve?

However constantly reminding myself of all this—for those first days there was hardly a waking moment when I did not miss Romeo. Meanwhile, I was needled by regret:

Didn't the vet warn us not to overstrain him? Might the bounding up and down the stairs playing fetch have hastened his end? Could more than the limited treatment we afforded have prolonged his life?

Amid that questioning was the sting of self-censure: *How much care and attention can be defensibly spent on a pet when so many fellow humans are in want? Within the universe of pain and suffering—at which point does it become unseemly to grieve the death of a pet?*

So it was, I continued to counter grief with the chastisement of reason. The adjustment to the absence of our pet, I reasoned, would be only a matter of making minor changes to

routines and habits. There would only be the ‘firsts’ to get over: the first few days without the dog walk; the first few nights to sleep without his little body snuggled between us. There would be the gradual getting used to the newly empty spaces: the corner of the kitchen absent of the dog food and dog dishes; the vacancy at the top of the stairs in the place of his bed and toys; the disappearance of his blanket on the sofa. Then would be the first few times of turning the house key and opening the front door to silence.

That would be the hardest.



But of course, time is the healer. After a week or so, routines were adjusting. Mundane preoccupations were crowding out the sadness of the home without the little dog.

Still, Romeo began to appear more frequently in dreams.

In the months leading up to his death, there had been recurrent dreams of rescuing him: There were sequences of pulling him out of icy water, grabbing him up before feral jaws snapped around his neck, losing him in dense underbrush. Yet in waking from those dreams there had been the reassurance of his breathing body in the blankets between us.

In the weeks following Romeo’s death, such ‘anxiety’ dreams took on greater detail: I searched for him on mountain trails, in jungles, on trains or crowded city streets. He was always in danger of being devoured, trampled underfoot or suffocated while I pounded helplessly on locked doors. I could always hear him whimpering—just out of reach...

So the final adjustment, still to be worked through— is in reaching down in the middle of the night to an empty space.



In the first week of getting used to the absence of the little dog, I brought together a file of all the pictures and video clips in which Romeo had appeared. There were hundreds: close-ups of him indoor and out in every conceivable dog pose; images of him curled up, running, eating, sleeping, swimming and peeing. For more than 11 years he had been poised in the middle of family vacations and in every birthday and Christmas.

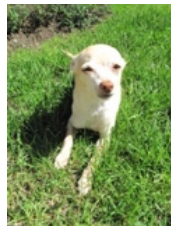
I was sadly reminded that I had but one blurry photo of the beloved family mutt, from the mid-1960s put down unnecessarily when she was just 5 years old for a bladder condition

easily treatable today. We were lucky, indeed, to have so many *aide-memoire* for Romeo. Still, I wondered— what will emerge as the essential memory of him?

Romeo was never at ease in being left alone. In the last few months of his life, he grew ever more anxious in on our departures. A few seconds after the door was locked, he would usually begin to wail. Before turning the key in coming home, we would hear the howl from the steps where he crouched. His strange cry would even be triggered by a too-quiet house. The closer he got to the end— the more intense and unearthly that cry became. It was a high-pitched undulating wail— eerie as a cry of a human in deep anguish.

As the little dog grew more distressed in separations, he became more frenzied in every reunion. Before the door opened, he came squealing down the stairs. He would dance around snorting with mad joy even as his breathing grew shallower. When lifted up, he would lick our faces with such frenzy it seemed his failing heart would burst. His squirming little body seemed to signal awareness that these instants of reunion were ever more precious.

Of course, we know that a dog's awareness is only of the moment— lacking in a sense of mortality. Still, whatever lies within the scope of canine sentience, Romeo's seemed to become more urgent as his end grew nearer. Even allowing that heart medication may have made him more high-strung, in those last months it was hard not to conclude that the little dog *sensed* he was on the verge of permanent separation. Hence, the agony in those separations and the crazy joy in every reunion became wilder— even to the morning of his death.



In considering this, it seems significant that the very word, 'separate', comes from the Latin '*separatus*', 'to pull apart'. Equally significant is the noun form 'separation'—"the condition of that which was previously joined, after being pulled asunder".

From this, there came to mind the medieval Christian belief that eternal separation from God was the ultimate punishment for the damned. In Dante's '*Inferno*', the damned souls were banished from all hope and bereft from all that was ever beloved. Hence inscribed above the gates of Dante's hell were the words: '*Abandon all hope ye who enter here*'. Yet what made the torment of the damned truly hellish— was the unrelenting *awareness* of the eternal separation...

Of course, torments and ecstasies— past, present and future—are products of the human imagination. A dog may intensely feel— but certainly doesn't think. Science informs that

a canine brain is fixed on the satiation of appetites of the moment. Yet in imagining such an ‘eternal present’— one could wonder whether in canine sentience, both separation and reunion are experienced timelessly... Does a closed door remain ‘eternally’ closed? Does the ‘beloved’ pack member, in disappearing behind the closed door, seem tantalizingly close but impossibly out of reach? Might Romeo’s howling in our absence have been imagined as the agony of ‘eternal separation’?

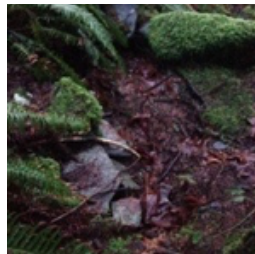
In defiance of logic, such anthropomorphic imaginings persist. Like the parent in the ‘*Twilight Zone*’ episode, groping for the hand of the child who slipped into another dimension— I still imagine flinging upon the door and thrusting in my hand to be licked...



In comparing stories with other Chihuahua owners, I was always struck by the similarities to Romeo they described in their beloved pets: the feistiness and the fierce loyalty being common traits.

So, wouldn’t another pet Chihuahua fill the gap left by the loss of our little companion? Although that thought occurred even in the first day after Romeo’s death, I initially dismissed it. There can never be another Romeo. Even a dog cloned of his DNA would not be *him*. The little creature that engaged in the world in his unique way was part of a unique family history is gone forever. Another dog would simply be another dog.

But couldn’t *something* of his presence be recaptured?



On walking back along the forest path on the morning after leaving the inscription on the grave of Romeo, there came an unexpected consolation. It came in a thought about Buddhist mediation— the Vipassana version of it which I’ve recently come into a small acquaintance through an email subscription.

So far, its most intriguing concept is that of '*Anatta*'. As I roughly understand it, the concept refers to the denial of permanent self-entities. In this way of thinking, 'individuality' itself is always in flux—constantly dissolving, merging and reshaping. The individual consciousness is thus an interrelated part of an impermanent universe. As magisterial as self-conscious awareness may seem—it is powerfully revealing to realize that at any given moment that innumerable other beings are thinking or feeling precisely (or almost precisely) as one does. With or without one's participation—even in one's permanent absence—the web of sentient life continues...

I stopped for a moment by the shady creek that flowed into the Minnekhada dam. Watching minnows darting away beneath the culvert, it occurred that my very perceptions at that moment had been perceived by others now absent and would be experienced by innumerable others who will come after. In Buddhist belief, it is this insight of the 'illusion' of individuality that potentially gives rise to compassion and wisdom. In a more immediate sense, this insight should give solace. This understanding should offer a far deeper acceptance of death than any fantasy of immortality...

Still, as I continued through the lush foliage along the trail, there arose a pang of anguish. How Romeo would love to be here now sniffing this air! How can it be denied that every death of a sentient creature was still a permanent loss? It is just not possible to reason away the gut sense that when every individual sentient creature, great or small, is unique unto itself. So, in that moment, the crudely apprehended Buddhist insight provided little solace...



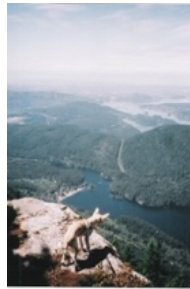
About a month later I received an email informing of the death of an old friend who had retired in the east. There was shock and disbelief followed by deep sadness for his wife and children. Since I hadn't seen him for several years, there was the sting for not having phoned him more often. There was also the sense of diminution: of suddenly becoming older and poorer...

In the days that followed, thoughts of my late friend were accompanied by throbbing of self-reproach. Did the anguish over the loss of Romeo not exceed the grief over my old friend?

Of course, one upholds the primacy of human relationships. Even in exploring the ethics of animal welfare we place the 'value' of lives of our fellow creatures above those of other species. Yet more immediately, loss that permanently disrupts daily dependencies is

felt in a particularly intimate way. The loss of the comfort of tugging on a leash, the absence of a beating heart felt on the chest, the disappearance of devoted stares is perhaps more selfishly missed than the death of a long absent friend. Still, as adults, we ought to know it is wrong to feel like children who cry more for the death of a goldfish than for that of a grandparent.

In that thought, I resolved to find out more about what Buddhism might inform about grieving...



Nearly a month after his absence, CM has put up a framed photo of Romeo. It is in the entranceway, right above the stairs where he used to wait for us behind the closed door. The picture was taken on one of our longer hikes together in his early years. It shows him standing on the edge of a cliff against a backdrop of mountains. While the ‘heart’ of Romeo that can never be captured in any photo—this one does him some justice.

Meanwhile, we have begun to talk about getting another dog next year—maybe even another Chihuahua. The idea no longer seems dishonourable. It is not that we hope for a replacement for Romeo. Yet we do long for the company of another little presence who may soon seem unique in its own way as Romeo was in his. Even if a new canine companion noses into our hearts, the photo of little Romeo will remain above the doorway.

Meanwhile, in the gradual healing, another image of Romeo is growing stronger than the memory of his howling at the door. It is an image of him from earlier years—running though tall grass twisting and turning in circles. To see him zigzag with little ruffs of delight through the tall grass was to behold joy in sheer being.

My nephew, a vet and a Chihuahua lover, recently said he remembered that Romeo was a “spirited” dog. If ‘spirit’ is to be understood as the manifestation of the sheer joy of being *alive*—then perhaps dogs do have a greater capacity for that joy that we humans can ever know. Maybe Chihuahuas have the biggest dog-spirits of all...



Finally, I am left with a sense of gratitude. I am grateful to have partaken of the ancient loyalties of the canine-human relationship, albeit while protecting a tiny dog's illusion that he was big and fierce. Romeo was big enough to hold up his end of the bargain—extending his loyalty and protection for his place near the fire.

Feeling such gratitude ever more tenderly in the months before his death, I had whispered in his twitching ear such praise as the following:

'We've had an amazing journey together haven't we, Romeo? There is no finer dog I can imagine having in our pack than you...'

In response, his little fox-head with the walnut sized brain would nudge itself under my hand in the uncanny way which canine creatures have of making their companion humans believe that they really *do* understand.

2015, July



Alone at the doorway

Fumbling at the lock
eager to reappear before
the little dog
howling behind the door

In that instant between
gnashing and clawing
in the walled in sentience of
utter separation
when desperate longing
for the departed
wrenches into joy unbounded
in the beloved's return—

What more need be imagined
of heaven or hell?

-2015, February