

End-of-Life Lessons from a Dear Old Cat



Recently, our precious cat, Blackie, passed away. She had lived to about 20 years of age. In closely observing her during the last six months of her life, several lessons about our own aging and end of life emerged.

(1) **Less energy with more need for rest in growing older**

Over the past few years, we noticed a gradual decline of energy in our cat, and a corresponding need for more rest. From chasing birds, catching mice, and climbing over our gate, she began to rest more and was content with just watching birds, leaving mice alone, and no longer jumping over the gate.

As we get older, a decline in our energy also occurs. Tasks take longer to perform, and we may need more sleep at night, as well as a nap during the day. All this adds up to less available time than we had in earlier years and less being achieved – which can result in frustration if one is not mindful.

(2) **Managing pain**

Toward the end of her life, we noticed that the cat's left hind leg began to be painful when she walked. However, she bravely managed her pain by stopping to rest every few steps, and by finding comfortable positions to lie in.

In our later years, discomfort and pain may become issues. At such time, pain management is essential. Mindfulness and acceptance of pain – without self-recrimination and negative self-talk – are vital. (Of course, to alleviate or control severe pain, painkillers may become necessary.)

(3) Meditation

During the last six months, our aged cat spent much of her time sitting or lying with her eyes open, alert, and watching her surroundings in a peaceful manner.

Seen from a human perspective, it was reminiscent of a person practicing open awareness meditation – where their attention is open (not focused on an object) and they remain aware of everything that is happening. Just being present with whatever is occurring, as well as letting thoughts and emotions arise and pass without judgment and reaction, one can remain calm and relaxed.

(4) Going into retreat

During her last weeks, the cat began to seek solitude. She no longer desired to come into the house, but wanted to remain alone in one of her favourite areas – a small palm garden in our backyard. Day and night, she was content to rest in that area.

Nearing the end of their life, people often seek to spend their last days quietly at home with family members, without all the social engagements and activities of earlier years. Some with a terminal illness, whose family is unable to care for them at home, may enter hospice care, which focuses on providing comfort and the best possible quality of life. In either case, spending one's final days in a quiet and peaceful setting with time to reflect in a supportive environment is important.

(5) Letting go

As the final weeks arrived, the cat became ever so gentle. Gone were any resistance, fighting, growling, or struggle, such as when we gently combed her fur to remove matted hair or lifted her and took her to another location. Becoming very weak, all she could do was trust in our tender care.

As we reach the end of life, we need to be able to let go of all mundane cares and concerns, as well as attachment to possessions, and trust that they will be appropriately taken care of. Undue worries will only diminish the chance of a peaceful death.

(6) Life arises, abides, and abates

Our computer photo gallery is filled with memories of the cat's aliveness, as well as her loving and fun nature – her joy of living in playing with a toy mouse, climbing onto the kitchen counter, and hiding in all sorts of nooks and crannies. By contrast, later photos often show her sleeping on

our bedroom sheepskin, resting on the living room sofa, and lying in the warm, winter sunshine by the window.

Similarly, our physical life begins with lots of energy in youth, flourishes with much accomplishment in adulthood, and then slowly declines with diminished vigour in the latter years. Finally, our life on earth will end. To consciously and deeply appreciate each day of life – seeing its many wonderful qualities, and rejoicing and delighting therein – is a most worthwhile practice.

(7) End of life can come quickly

Only about two months ago, our cat was still quite active. At midnight, when one of us went out to the balcony where she had her “cat bed”, she was always ready for her snack with a little “meow” and often sat waiting on the front door mat. In the morning, when we let her into the house, she headed to one of the armchairs – ready for her morning back rub. Then she would make her way to the kitchen, soon sitting ready for breakfast at her empty cat bowl. When it wasn’t coming right away, she would jump on a kitchen chair and look over the kitchen counter, as if to ask, “Is it ready?” or “When is it coming?”

Only about six weeks later, she began to lose her appetite. More often than not, she would barely sniff at her favourite cat food of fish and turn away from it. Finally, in the last week, she even lost her desire to drink water. All this happened over a relatively short period of time.

Similarly, in our lives, at a certain point in time, a downturn in well-being, and then end of life can come quickly. In the Czech Republic, we joyously celebrated the eightieth birthday of a dear widow who had shown us kind hospitality while we lived there during the nineties. Not long after her birthday, her health began to suddenly plummet, leading to her death.

(8) When “time is up”

Three years ago, our cat was bitten by an insect in our backyard, which caused a serious reaction. She spent much time biting the area of the sore and pulling out the hair around it. She also lost her appetite, became weak, and lay curled up behind a cane palm. We thought she might die! Yet, after a few days, she returned to the house and came back inside. Her appetite slowly returned and we nursed her back to health with a special warm “cat soup” we prepared from her favourite cat food.

This time, it was different. We bought her gourmet cat food – such as tuna and red snapper in gravy. No interest. Finally, we brought her back inside the house and had her sleep on a soft sheepskin with a blanket on top – but there was no change. She just lay there, listless, barely moving

around. Her life was slowly, but surely ebbing away, till finally it came to end.

In our lives, too, there comes a moment when "time is up" – and nothing can be done to prevent or stop it. All the well-wishing, prayers, fasting, rituals, medicines, diets, and tears will be of no avail.

None of us knows the time when death will come and leave our body lifeless. May we each make the very best use of our time – *carpe diem* – seize the opportunities we have each day, and make our life as meaningful as possible.

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Our beloved cat peacefully died in the early morning hours of April 26, 2022. How sad it was to discover that her life had completely left that morning. It was hard not to shed some tears over the loss. She had brought unforgettable joy into our lives.

Later that morning, we arranged with Pets at Rest (a division of RSPCA) for the cat to be lovingly collected and taken to their crematorium in the city.

Even though the dear cat has been cremated, at times we have felt that she is still with us in a deep and undefined way. Surely her energy and spirit remain in the house. And, we know that she will continue to live on in our hearts (more than simply as a memory, because memories do not truly live and often do not last long).

Finally, while the cat's physical body has now perished, her spirit, awareness, and consciousness would not have been extinguished because they belong to a non-physical realm. We hope to one day be reunited with Blackie in some form.

Alexander and Eva Peck (May 4, 2022)

(For Blackie's life story, picture gallery and poem about her, go to <https://universal-spirituality.net/divinity/experience-god/in-remembrance-of-a-special-cat/>)

Postscript

We wrote the following letter of gratitude to RSPCA (Pets at Rest) after Blackie had been taken from our home.

Dear Friends at RSPCA — Pets at Rest,

It has been a pleasure to work with RSPCA as we dealt with the dying of our dear cat — with whom we journeyed in life for about 15 years.

Today was the day that Bree from Pets at Rest came to take our beloved cat to the crematorium at Wacol.

We were impressed with the caring and loving way that Bree attended to our cat that had died. We had several tender moments — the way that Bree picked up the dead cat and gently placed her into a soft basket that she had brought; how she wrapped the cat in a warm blanket, with only her face showing; and finally, how Bree tenderly placed the cat in the basket into the mortuary space in the RSPCA van.

We valued how Bree generously gave us the time to ask questions and say goodbye to the dear cat. We did not feel rushed for a moment.

We are grateful for the staff at Pets at Rest because as many pet owners have discovered, bereavement at the death of an animal is no different from bereavement at the death of any dear friend — and therefore patient, understanding, and compassionate staff, such as we saw in Bree, is vital.

With heartfelt appreciation,

Alex and Eva