

*Lessons From My Dogs,
Death Be Not Death*

The miracle that came to us when Flash was given only three weeks to live on November 2nd of 2009 was also present when he died five and a half months later on April 15th, 2010. In the winter issue of *La Joie* I wrote about *living* with miracles, but I found that as our lives unfolded and I began living from my heart instead of my fear, these same miracles extended themselves, not turning away in the hour death, but instead reigning more present than ever in death and beyond. (And perhaps whether we view certain events as ‘good’ or as ‘bad’ is up to us and our perception of events, for often there is a silver lining to life’s eternal waves.) Because the tendency is to see life and death as antipodes: life as a thing of goodness and blessing and death as something to be feared, I write now about the beauty of death, for death is not life’s antithesis. It is the opposite of birth, but only a part of life...and the ever unfolding mystery of eternity, of continuity through impermanence.

Death be not death, though some have looked on thee in fear. But thou art not to be feared. Those whom deem thou worst of fates, realize this: death does not kill, but gives life for, in opposition, shows only life’s value. And if we could each day live of this, no days would pass in vain. For after death, there is still life.

How strange, one year later, to walk these same well-worn trails and have not your small black scampering self behind me. How strange to look upon the viburnum whose rust leaves were just turning when we received the news that terrified, words no animal guardian ever wants to hear. How I cried by those rust leaves knowing you would not smell the spicy sweetness of its springtime white. Until I stopped crying...and asked for a miracle. And the miracles settled gently around us. You did see the viburnum’s sweet springtime white. And you did see the flowers bloom...against every foretold odd. But now as I walk through the silent yard, I ask aloud, “Where are you?” And daily you answer me:

*I am with you still
I do not sleep.
I am the thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints in snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,*

*I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not think of me as gone.
I am with you still in each new dawn. **

Flash died by my side in bed surrounded by Chance and Sasha, surrounded by Love. I remembered back to the day he had told my friend and animal communicator that he had a real fear of being paralyzed and of not feeling well. He told her how he wanted his strong healthy body back again, and how he loved me and his life and didn't want to leave. But as she explained to him the doctor's decree and his inevitable fate, he said then he wanted to feel really well and then be done. His wish had come true. The day before he died, he had run up and down the yard, chasing butterflies and barking at perceived predators. I ate a simple sandwich at noon and as always set the plate down afterward for the three dogs to lick. I stood and walked to the kitchen with my glass and when I turned, Flash was bent in two and jerking in a way I had never before seen. My only thought was that he was dying. I dropped to the ground and placed my hands on each of his sides, his body literally bent at a right angle convulsing while his legs compulsively paddled. I held him firmly and spoke gently, telling him over and over again, "I love you. I love you. I love you." My overwhelming desire was that he not suffer pain.

The seizure subsided and Flash looked dazed and exhausted. During this quiet spell and after several phone calls, I was able to pack him up into the little bag I wore strapped to my chest, and walk through the air and trees to the river with him and Chance and Sasha.

The light danced and sparkled on the water's rippled surface. I marveled how one moment the water could be turbulent, the next moment calm. And I stood very still and felt Flash there against me. I dipped my hands into the river's cold breath as I always did and touched Flash's long thin nose, a baptism of all that had been and all that was still to be. Then we turned around not realizing then that this would be our last walk together. On the way home I looked to the spot where, a few weeks after his surgery, I had set him on the ground and seen him walk a couple paces on his own. I'd been filled with elation then. Now as I walked I felt a quiet sense of contentment that we were all walking through sunlight together, a gentle peace and gratitude for the time I'd been granted with Flash.

But the seizure never completely broke and he endured another and another with intermittent twitching in between. I took him to the emergency vets that evening, after calling a friend from whom I'd been estranged, and she drove me... just one more blessing and miracle to arise from the seemingly tragic.

By then after heavy doses and injections of both Valium and Phenobarbital, Flash was more or less unresponsive. The vet explained that Flash would not recover; the seizure had gone on too long. He suggested we put Flash to sleep right away instead of taking the risk that he would die by seizing. Or, if not, he advised that he should stay the night monitored under supervision. I said I would not euthanize him in a sterile veterinary hospital and that he would come back to the love and comfort of his own home, at least for one last night. I said I'd monitor him at home, a risky proposition at best because he could endure another seizure during the night, from which he could, as the vet had warned, die a difficult death.

By now I knew this was his last night. By now I knew that I would have to euthanize him by morning. And just how do you do that? How do you make the one decision that is harder than all the rest to make? How do you end the physical life of a being you love more than you love yourself? And how do you take another's life into your own hands, playing god with life and death? How *can* you? Because you love him, that is the only way how. I called my homeopathic vet, one of the most gentle and compassionate men I know, and by a true miracle he was not only home, but willing to come to my house the next morning so that Flash could depart from the physical world that he had for so long known and loved, in the peace and comfort of his own bed.

That night the three dogs and I lay huddled in vulnerable disbelief and I stroked Flash's breathing body throughout the night remembering all the places we had been together (France seven times, the beach many times, my mother's, camping, sneaking into restaurants and hotels, being kicked out of restaurants and hotels) and all the small moments in between that would make his leaving so hard to bear: how he would lie in the dog bed before the woodstove in his older years, but not before first throwing up the blanket with his head and crawling underneath; how he would seek out the spots of sunshine in the house and follow the light from place to place; how he would scratch the earth with his front feet and take a giant bite of dirt; how he, always a beacon of light-hearted fun, would try to mount Chance or Sasha and instigate play; how he would chase the reflection of my watch or any other flash of light, for hours at end, enjoying the process, with never a need to eat his quarry or reach some arbitrary goal.

That last night together held the greatest miracle of all—which is simply this: to be with another in the darkest hour, without the need to speak, accepting one another, connecting soul to soul, just being there beside the other. He slept the night next to me in his subdued narcotic slumber and never broke into another seizure. Marveling at the miracle of love and life, I stroked his tired body the entire night, covering him with kisses and whispering again and again, “I love you, Flash. I love you.”

When the first light of morning came I carried him out for one last taste of sun and air. I dipped him down to see the spring flowers I had planted back in the fall, willing him to see them bloom and knowing in my heart that, even against the odds, he would. And with him in my arms I stepped up onto the old apple crate to survey the fields and woods beyond. Flash always wanted to be taller than his short legs allowed and enjoyed this tall perspective sniffing the air from heights above. At last I picked a big white viburnum puff whose sweet, yet spicy fragrance defies my written attempts to this day. I carried Flash back inside and lay him on the bed, his head upon my pillow. Then I lay the white viburnum, symbolic of the spring, across his black and shiny shoulders.

The grief of losing someone you love, beyond that which words can express, never leaves, yet in time does change. If we are lucky the memory becomes something...different, but as beautiful as the living life to which we once were bound and loved.

I stood amongst the spring flowers in which I had posed him so many times. Those first flowers—born from bulbs, born from something quiet, resting, waiting beneath the frozen world of winter—pop their smiling heads up from the earth just when hope is ebbing. And because they come on winter’s tail, the gifts they bear—color after winter’s gray, beauty, hope and joy, ephemeral lives of fragile petals—are all the more welcome in greeting.

But spring’s flowers were gone in the dry warmth of summer. I planted petunias and zinnias and cosmos from seeds amidst Flash’s garden at the base of the tree. I placed his framed photo—a bright-eyed Flash, handsome and alert—in the garden among the petunias. It was the photo I’d taken of him without knowing that in less than twenty-four hours this face and body would be no more than a memory existing in my mind.

Flash saw the peak of nature’s fleeting pageant. Then he too was gone. Photo after photo attest that just a few short months ago there were daffodils, hyacinths, tulips, and Flash. But where was he now? Like the flowers who will return again, Flash was gone to me only in the physical sense. Sometimes as the breeze blew and the wind chimes rang, singing out

a cryptic message, I would stop and stand very still and there I would find Flash— in the lightest touch of the breeze and the stillness of a mind at peace. Sometimes he would be there in the light reflected on the river or a marbled wave. You cannot see the breeze, but you can feel it and that is how Flash was for me.

Yet during the first few weeks or months after he died, the light and joyous energy had fled our house. He had been the playful one, always initiating Chance and Sasha and even me into much needed play. I searched for him all over, seeking some sign his spirit was nearby.

But I couldn't feel him anywhere. I remembered how when Lauren died, my grief and dense depression blocked me from the connection I so desperately craved from her. Yet about two months after Flash left his physical body, I sat outside and began seeing images of him before me: walking crookedly in the yard, eating and running. I felt him. Then, as I raised my eyes, I saw before me the heart-shaped leaves of the African violet, and then the morning glory and the moonflower; then the grapevine...they were all hearts! On our walk I saw the heart-shaped leaves of the polonia, and the redbud and even the zucchini and cucumber in my garden had heart-shaped leaves.

The love had always been there; I had just needed to open my own heart and listen.

I watered and tended Flash's garden. And as I stood in the warmth of summer, I noticed a small plant popping up. Thinking it a weed, I reached to pull it out and make room for Flash's flowers. Then something made me stop. My sister said that weeds were just flowers nobody wanted, and cared for all of them. Many so-called weeds bore flowers and I decided to let the little weed grow up within his garden. It took only a few days to see that this weed was a sunflower, planted not by me but by some passing bird, some hand of Fate.

As the tiny sunflower began to grow I felt happy. It brought life where grief had reigned. As the small green plant grew bigger, I felt my heart growing with it. The flower was not yet visible, closed tightly in its bud; at first the plant stood only a foot, but then two feet, then three, but still not more than me.

In the mornings, I'd find it pointing toward the east waiting for the sun to rise, but by nightfall it had turned to face the house and gentle mountains behind which the sun had dropped. The sunflower is a worshipper of warmth and light, and Flash had been one too. The flower was still without a face and yet I felt I knew this gentle presence as well as I knew my own.

As the lone sunflower grew, I found myself anticipating the day on which it'd unveil that playful yellow face. It grew taller than any of the surrounding plants. By now it had grown two feet taller than I and I would tilt my head to see the bud. And the feeling that I knew this friend grew daily...until one soft June day as I stood staring at the happy, smiling face and asked very softly, very slowly:

“Flash?”

I *knew* it.

It was the spot where I had always posed him for the spring flowers pictures. It was the spot where I had stood his framed photo until it rained. Had he and I not climbed up to stand high upon the crate on his last morning, our faces pointing toward the sun? He was dazed and drugged from medication and constant seizures, but could he not feel the breeze and gentle light upon his face that one last time? And had I not also stooped to touch the spring flowers with him in my arms? If I had not by now gotten the message, it hit me full force as I stood staring at this one sunflower taller than any I had ever seen in France, taller than anything around. Each of the green leaves was one enormous heart. Was not green the color of the heart chakra and was it not the color of healing? Huge heart-shaped leaves!

“*Flash?*”

The voice that came back to me with lightening speed was but a whisper: *Turn around. Look up to the heavens.*

Very slowly I turned around raising my eyes upward. There before me was the dachshund wind vein in the sky. Goosebumps raised up on my arm. Then I stood and listened. And this is what I heard:

Don't ever worry. Listen to your heart. My brain was working fast...or was it my heart? The sunflower followed the sun. Flash had always loved the sunshine. The flower was enormous towering over us all. Flash had always wanted to be taller. Now he at last was taller than all of his women. The happy flower laughed and smiled. Flash had always urged in us this light and playful energy. And the sunflower, with its enormous heart-shaped leaves, was right next to Lauren, a little white pine, who Flash had also dearly loved.

And so it is.

Was it real or all a dream? Could I dare to believe this new reality? If I feared being taken for a nut, I had only to imagine that the madness, and there was truly some madness—wars, hatred, killing, environmental disasters, greed and corruption—was nuts instead. I could imagine that nature's love and beauty, surrounding me everywhere I looked, were real. And if I was shunned as a kook, who cared?

When I started thinking the world would have me committed, or worse that I would have me committed, I remembered Galileo who *knew* in body, amazing mind and soul, but also in his heart the truth about the planets.

For those of you who have read until now, perhaps you'll know as I knew that Flash had come back, if only for a very brief time, as the most playful and tallest form that he could find close by to those he loved. And perhaps it was no accident that he stood two feet from Lauren.

When I begin to doubt and lose faith I close my eyes and ask my heart for an answer. It doesn't take long to feel great love for a little white pine and a giant flower. And if I feel love for these two plants then mustn't I extend this love to all pines and all sunflowers, and to all trees and all flowers, and to all plants, weeds included, and to all life? Just as loving one dog made me feel love for all.

Open your eyes. What do you see? Love is all around you. And maybe one day the reality of miracles will be our norm. For some it already is.

And so the moments pass. And so the moments are. We are all together simply living out the miracle that is life. Thank you Flash. I love you today, tomorrow... and always.

*Taken from a Native American prayer.

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