

A PASSING MOOD

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My family loves Autumn. I acknowledge it too, but for me there is also something desperate about the fall season, all the bright days pointing away from summer and toward the solstice in December; that is the moment I start to look for spring, much to my wife's shaking of her head.

I was born a summer baby, on the hottest day in summer my mom said. I guess I am a spring and summer soul. Some like it hot. I am a bit melancholy or perhaps it is just the passing of our dog Kota that lingers.

Kota passed away quietly Sunday afternoon, a prince to the end. My wife tells me he was sitting out in the yard where she had carefully helped him stand up to pee. When he flopped back down, Margaret tells me he raised his nose up to the sky, sniffed the air, and then lay down again and his poor heart gave out. We were with him in the last moments. It was a peaceful death.

Some folks say "It is just a dog," whatever that means. For me he was family. A being is a being is a being. When the vet said he had congestive heart failure and had only a month or so to live, we prepared for the worst, and watched this disease slowly wrack his body, taking his weight away, and reducing him to a skeleton of his former self.

On his daily walks, the one thing he loved more than life, he now fell behind the rest of us, each day less and less able to walk, until finally he would wait for us to turn around on the trail and pick him up on the way back. He would be standing there when we came around the corner. Then he could no longer take those walks at all and became house bound.

He became unable to stand up and had to be lifted up into a standing position and pointed toward the door to the outside and guided there, often falling one or more times. His body was deserting him, but he never deserted it. Almost to the very end, no matter how wasted his body became, he was quietly just 'in there' looking out, the same dog as he ever was. Inside, he did not change as his body changed. He just took it.

And my wonderful wife took it upon herself to look after him much of the day, while I took the night shift. I tend to get up in the middle of night anyway. Kota would cry to go out, and I would help him into the yard and the dark. There he would take care of things and then collapse somewhere out there. I would have to find him and help him back into the house.

And Kota slowly lost his appetite and thus his strength. Margaret would go to great lengths to find food that he would eat, cooking him endless special lunches or dinners, plying him with the very best in tidbits that he might accept. She would very carefully wash him when he ran into trouble, comb his hair, hold his head. I was almost jealous.

Each day Margaret would take Kota with her to our meditation (shrine) room, where he would lie there while she did her practice, reciting various prayers over him. For a while he made a real point of walking over to the animal-skin drum and smelling it. Then, after some weeks, he ignored that old drum and just sat there while Margaret practiced.

It is hard to be cheery when someone you are close to is declining. It is hard to lose yourself in your ordinary distractions, when impermanence is always whispering in your ear. Perhaps Margaret will be moved to write her account of all this. I hope she does. She has been a saint in this.

When Kota passed away that afternoon, as it so happened, most of our kids and their significant others were visiting. We all gathered around Kota as Margaret performed Phowa practice (the transference of consciousness) for him. Then we joined hands with one another and reminisced him and said the mantras and what-not that we were moved to say. Practices of this kind will go on for a day or so yet.

A good friend of ours, Sue Connolly Smith, wrote with a wonderful story after hearing about Kota. She had listened to His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche talking about all the dogs at his monastery Sherab-Ling in India. In Tibet and India, people who no longer want to take care of their animals often sneakily leave them by a monastery, because they know that the monks will feed them out of compassion. Tai Situ Rinpoche said that the dogs are there to participate in the dharma, and then he told a very special story that I will share here because it is so wonderful.

Tai Situ Rinpoche said that at one point there were so many dogs at his monastery that he had several taken far away to reduce their sheer numbers. Then what happened is this: somehow the dogs found their way to Gyuto, where His Holiness the Karmapa lives, and complained to the Karmapa for several days that Tai Situ Rinpoche had sent them away. Then the dogs left Gyuto and found their way back to Sherab-Ling. After that, they were never sent away again.

Photo: A photo that marks my mood.

