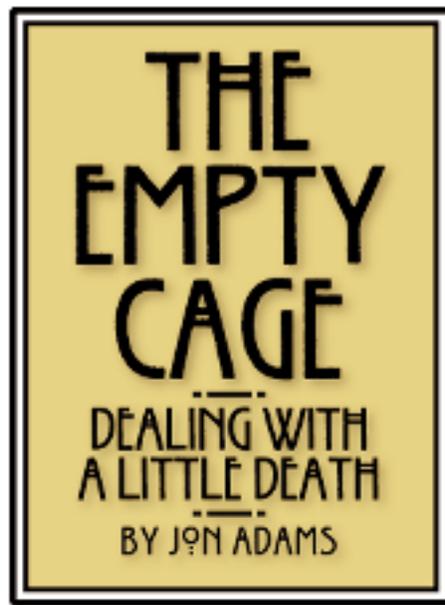


**THE
EMPTY
CAGE**

DEALING WITH
A LITTLE DEATH

BY JON ADAMS

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THE EMPTY CAGE

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INTRODUCTION (August 1998)

It is just two weeks and three days since Beery died in my hands. Perhaps it is still too early to begin this, but if I waited some of the events would be difficult to remember. I begin it because it's part of the healing.

When I decided to write about the loss of my dear pet and best friend, I went to Borders bookstore and browsed through their books about dealing with grief. The Psychology section contained a variety of self-help and testimonial-packed tomes on the subject, all focused on bereavement due to the death (or impending death) of spouses, children, siblings and other family members. I could not find anything about dealing with the loss of a pet. A search of books about animals only deepened my despair. There were more written about parakeets than I needed to see at the time. I went home empty-handed but returned a few days later and bought a couple volumes that I will recommend later.

My decision to write about it came about a month after Lynn and I lost Beery, and that is an integral part of the story. I thought it would be a good idea to take some preparatory notes. I work a full day and some nights at a computer, so I opened a file for that purpose. A few days after, I tried to put something into words.

The note file is still empty.

Finally, it made sense to sit down and try to write something substantive. I began with a chronological ordering of his illness, how we first accepted whatever his first veterinarian told us he needed, how we dealt with the frustrations of relapse after relapse, why we changed doctors, and how I grew closer to Beery as together we descended that terrible spiral that ended with his death. I consulted a copy of his vet records supplied by Dr. Tia Greenberg for dates and medications. Confirming dates from our checkbook, I put together an accurate account of the period from his onset of psittacosis in late January up to his death from a tumor on July 30, 1998.

Then I put it all aside.

I realized the story would have to contain that historical account, but that the real story was still unfolding. That part, which was not yet finished, would be about me.

I don't know anyone who never had a pet at some time in their life. We get them when we are young. We learn a bit about animal husbandry from the relationships we build with the little (or big) critters. Early in the process we discover how dependent they are on us. Cats, dogs, iguanas, birds, fish, ponies or hamsters - no matter what species - we must feed them, provide them with a decent habitat, keep them safe from harm and take care of them when they get sick. Inevitably, we learn how to deal with their loss. Alas, unless you are keeping a giant sea turtle or a very health young parrot, chances are you will outlive it.

My life could be chaptered by the pets I have owned and cared for. I've had dogs and cats, fish and snakes, chickens and caged birds. Except for our three felines, all of them have died. I have dealt with that as I always did: First the shock, then the despair of missing them, and finally the gradual recovery - living the lesson that life must continue. Some of those losses were more egregious than others, but in each case, I managed.

Beery was another story.

A few words about metaphysics: No matter what is the nature of your faith, if you have a religious persuasion or creed, this book will not offend your beliefs. Everyone has fundamental codes and values. Yours are yours and mine are mine. While I was raised in a Christian congregation in a small Ohio village, my religious doctrines evolved over time into what I am comfortable with today. If you believe in predestination - that everything that

happens was preordained by a creator - you will find something of value in this book. If you do not, you will also find this book is for you.

I have not attempted to give this book a religious focus. My relationship with the Buddha is only casual, a point of concentration in a busy and noisy universe. But my teacher, now gone to his eternal self, said to me once: "Patience is a virtue, but it stifles and blocks the inevitable. Always be impatient!"

(Long Beach, CA, August 1998)

SECOND INTRODUCTION (November 2004)

I wrote the first introduction in August 1998 just eighteen days after Beery died. The first few parts were archived on my computer shortly after that and sat there until I stumbled across them in 2004. Although I had not forgotten the manuscript, events had interrupted work on it and after a time I went on to other duties. THE EMPTY CAGE slid into its temporary hiding place.

In April of 2002 my marriage effectively ended when my wife of over twenty years announced she was leaving. In a few months I sued for divorce and tried to adjust. The dissolution process dragged on for over two years and I decided to sell the house and move from Long Beach. In late June, 2004, I temporarily relocated to a cottage in rural Ventura County, California and later began to write about eight hours a day.

My short stories written from 1988 through 2000 were voluminous. I had submitted several for publication during the nineties, and did have a few published in small journals and university quarterlies. For the most part, they sat on a hard drive, organized by completion dates and untouched for years. I brushed some of them clean, made objective and subjective alterations, and self-published five chap books of about five stories each. These I mailed or gave to friends and relatives.

I worked daily on the two unfinished novels that I began in 2002. One is complete, albeit "unfinished" in my critical lexicon. The other is ongoing and growing at about a thousand words a day. This latter work required me to search for a line that popped into my memory one day. I filtered through my archives for the line, floating incomplete before my mind's eye. It was in this process that I rediscovered THE EMPTY CAGE.

All writers are cognizant of the binge factor: There are periods when the fingers get sore from sudden spurts of energized and creatively elevated work. Punctuated by long periods of ordinary activity, those binges come and go with time. After I relocated, and after I read a life-altering book, I entered a binge epoch.

I live in a cottage composed of two metal quonset huts surrounded by remote, dust blown farmland. My remaining possessions are crammed into this abode or stored in a nearby barn. My work desk is in a corner of the kitchen. My three-year-old Budgie, Bisbee-Bird, hangs nearly above my head as I type this. My three young cats must remain inside as the coyotes range just outside the gate and doors.

It is comfortable by my simple standards, and I appreciate the largess of my sister and her generous husband, who allow me to reside here rent free. But, the environment, the cultural difference between this area and the former, the lack of local friends or any outlet for the anxieties that arise during a prolonged and difficult divorce, all have driven me at times to despair. I spent the first month here sitting on a bench outside the kitchen door in a little vine-covered patio speaking to no one in particular but nevertheless talking to myself all the time. My mind was captive to the inactivity of two attorneys and an absolute desire to be rid of the woman to whom I once pledged my troth. I filled trash bins with emptied scotch bottles and junk food bags. Nothing moved. Nothing happened. All was despair and fog.

One day I bought a book by Dr. Phil McGraw, SELF MATTERS. Opening it to the introduction, I didn't put it down until twelve hours later. By the next day I had consumed the work, written my "Manifesto," and gone back to work on my two novels! The binge has lasted over two months, not withstanding a recent two-week vacation trip to Europe. (I needed the break to let my fingertips recover from the bruises!)

Oh, yes! I found the line I was looking for in THE EMPTY CAGE's unfinished manuscript: "*Grown men crying was not good form.*"

It was time to finish something, and Beery was worth writing about. First, let me tell you the "back story," about people and pets, about how this all came to pass.

(Somis, CA, November 2004)

DEDICATION

To every pet that has ever owned me: Ginger, No-Name, Jinx, Hamlet, Ophelia, Marmalade, Trotsky, Goodie Two Shoes, Yellow Boy, Ahmose, Jabberwocky, Chauncey, Satchel, Bunjii, Rosie, all sixteen Society Finches, Tehuti, Bebop, Beery, Bubby and Bisbee. For all you gave me, I do this in your names.

I. The First Revelation

1. THE WHITE ROCK

I sat down on the wide stone. It was only eight inches above the ground, so I crossed my legs in front of me, facing the black ceramic garden Buddha under the giant bird of paradise bush. The hundred-degree afternoon heat burned my neck. I was careful not to step on the flat granite rock between the statue and me engraved with the name, "BEBOP." I had buried our first Budgie beneath it almost two years before, in the very spot where the mute Buddha stared day and night.

It was Friday, the last day of July, one of the dog days of summer. Tears dripped from my chin. My T-shirt clung to the sweat on my back. I leaned forward and whispered to no one.

"Why?"

No one gave me an answer.

"How can this hurt so bad?"

A few meters away our young parakeet, Beery, lay where I had carefully placed his body, on a fresh clean towel inside a red mahogany cigar humidor. He had died in my hands the day before.

"I don't understand why I can't get a grip on this," I whispered. "I've got to understand why!"

I had purchased the humidor on sale earlier that week. It had been on display at the cigar shop and I told them to keep the round humidifying element. The clerk thought it was a strange request, so I explained what the box was going to be used for. Her face filled with surprise.

"He has a tumor in his tummy," I had said. I carried it home and hid it in a drawer in my office, still wrapped in brown paper.

The white stone radiated its heat up my backside. I read and re-read Beery's grave marker, tracing a finger along the letters. My eyes were dry now, and I sniffed the last congestion out of my nostrils.

"When my dad died, I handled it better than this. When Sally died, I got through it without going to pieces. What's happening to me?"

I choked back the impulse to let it out again. Somebody slid open a French door beyond the back fence. I wondered if she had overheard.

The white stone had come with the deed. We bought a fixer-upper in the early eighties, complete with a backyard full of tall dead weeds and busted concrete blocks, unfilled dog holes and long unused children's wading pools, crushed underfoot and chewed full of holes by years of neglect and puppy teeth. During the clearing I had found it along the far fence near the back of the garage, amid a pile of less interesting rocks and broken bricks. After a few years of migrating from place to place in the border garden, it had arrived at this spot, directly opposite the ever-opened back door.

"How come I managed to get on after Beery died? Beery wasn't sixteen years old! We only had him about two years..."

I had begun to meditate, sitting on the rock, back in the mid eighties after I quit my job at a brokerage firm and went back to graphic design. I got a job in Malibu. it was a forty-five mile one-way commute. I had to leave by six in the morning to beat the traffic jams. I would bring out a coffee, get on the rock, and give myself about ten minutes to unjam my

brain waves. It got to be a good habit.

“Why?”

The meditation was real. I had spent a lot of time studying and reading Zen. I learned the most important thing about Zen Buddhism that way: You don't get much out of reading about it. You have to do it! That first winter of working in Malibu turned out to be a wet one. My meditating gradually migrated back up on the porch and onto a plastic lawn chair.

I'm not a religious Buddhist. I'm not a capital “B.” What drew me to a layman's appreciation for the practice of sitting Zen was the pure simplicity of it. My arthritis decreed that I could forsake the cramped lotus position, so I learned to vacuum sweep my mind of cognitive thoughts while sitting, even standing, if necessary. It makes a lot of difference to me that I can completely empty my head for a few minutes whenever I get stressed or melancholy.

That day, I wasn't planning to try it. My emotional state for the past twenty-four hours made sure of that. I had spent the day of Beery's death taking care of his things - cleaning his cage, emptying his dishes, washing and drying his towels. My eyes were flush with tears the whole time. For a while, I laid him on a towel in the bottom of his cage. It hung where he slept at night, in the windowed corner of our bedroom. Later, I put him in the humidior. I laid his head on his mirror. It was his favorite toy and his alter ego, whom he named “Bubby.” I put his long cowbell and his five-ring toy behind him, a fresh-cut rosebud in front of his breast. Then I folded another clean towel (one that always covered the top of his cage at night) over all that. On top of the second towel I placed a few photographs of Beery, Lynn and me, and a handwritten note reading, “We love you very much, Beery Buddy Bird. -Jon and Beery's Gee.”

The last thing I added was a lock of hair cut from my temple. Then I closed and sealed the box, put it on my laser printer, and tried to go to work.

“I can't work. I can't think clearly. Why? Why has this hurt so much? I'm in my fifties! I should be able to cope with it.”

I had tried to keep a straight face that day. Our cleaning lady showed up around noon, and I told her what had happened. She was very sorry, went in to see the box and crossed herself a few times. I didn't want to let her see me cry.

All my life I had been reminded that grown men don't cry. As a young boy I followed my father's example. I never saw him cry once. When he died and Lynn and I went up to Thousand Oaks to console my mother, sister and her two girls, I was a brick. Everyone around me seemed to go to pieces. I hugged and talked to them, helped make the arrangements. After the first day, when everything settled into a dreary rhythm, I found a few minutes to go into his bedroom, turn off the light, close the door, sit on the edge of his bed, and bawl my eyes out. Nobody saw or heard me. Grown men crying was not good form.

So why couldn't I just go in the bedroom behind me, close the door and have a good deep cry? Why, after a whole day and a night of sorrow, couldn't I shake the tears and awful anguish? What was it about this particular pet that made the loss so difficult to handle?

No answer. Yet.

There came a lucid moment. I straightened my back, brought my hands against my abdomen and settled my eyes on the shiny bald pate of the black image before me. What happened next was a revelation, the first of two.

Gautama Buddha was a man. He was pretty ordinary in the way men come and go, except that he was a prince at one time. He was also a very open vessel. He had been taught a certain way of life revolving around the niceties of sumptuous palaces, all the attendant

riches of royalty and the expectations of a very comfortable life. He had no contact with the way of things beyond the palace walls, so when he ventured out one day and came face to face with all the suffering and poverty of the real world, it shocked him into leaving home to seek the answer to the meaning of his life.

He became a sort of universal cosmic lightening rod for wisdom and compassion. When it resulted in his enlightenment, a religion was founded on the man's revelations.

When you look at a Buddha, you are not considering a god. You are considering your own state. You are looking inward for the same sort of clues that he sought. Early in my meditations, I found that you need a mantra. That's a spoken word or two that you never really speak out loud but you repeat over and over in your mind's mouth to settle your breathing into a certain rhythm. It's used more in transcendental meditation than in any form of Buddhism. I made up my own long ago. Here it is.

"Within you. Within me."

I started the mantra in my head. It had been years since I had done it, and it felt calming, soothing to me. I quickly forgot about the tears. I felt easy, almost good.

"Within you. Within me."

The hot rock seemed to cool off. The bleaching sun went somewhere. The air stirred.

I suddenly felt the beginning of a cool breeze against my cheek. It stunned me and I stopped the mantra for a few seconds before continuing. It grew to a full fledged puff of wind, coming from the direction of the space above the Buddha's head, the direction of the fence behind my tomato patch. That was the hottest part of the garden. But the breeze was cool, almost like the marine air that sweeps in off the ocean on normal nights, bringing the low clouds and fog.

It bathed me from the waist up and brushed my face as if a fan had been turned toward me. I straightened up more to let it cool me more.

It stopped as suddenly as it had come and the oppressive heat returned. Just like that. That's when the thought jumped all over me.

I was born just for this!

I had been brought into this world for what had just happened! I had been the one who helped Beery through to the other side, from the beginning of my life. It had been my duty to be with him, through his illness, through his passing. I had been born for that purpose.

I was stunned! I remember that I nearly leaped up, off the white rock and stumbled to a nearby lawn chair to get a hold. I sat down and said it out loud.

"I was born just for this!"

It wasn't spoken as a question. It already seemed so clear.

2. ENLIGHTENMENT

The pinnacle of Zen is achieving enlightenment. That's a state reached through the act of "satori." Satori is kind of a slap-in-the-face happening that springs out of nature, suddenly revealing an almost perfect understanding of everything. It's a flash of insight that comes from nowhere and grabs your heart and never lets go.

In western traditions there are some mystics who have achieved this state, but for the most part of our philosophical and metaphysical history, sudden enlightenment has not been an accepted religious condition. I had always wondered about it, and marveled that it could ever take place.

For a few moments, the wonder ceased.

Time for a reality check! I could feel my heart race! I sat back in the chair and gripped the rails. The plastic was hot, and so was I. Just a moment before I had felt as if someone tossed a tub of cold water on me. Now it was past, and I could consider what had happened.

I had no illusions about achieving satori, or enlightenment. What I could make of it was simply this: I had achieved a sudden realization that might help me to understand the depth of my grief. The thought: I was born just for this!..., was a revelation that had come from deep within. It was the revelation that had been there all the time, and it was something I had to consider carefully.

I got through the mini-physical quickly. Nothing had fallen on my head. I wasn't having heart failure. I was O.K. The next check was directed at my mental well-being.

My method for testing where my brain has been is this: I step out of my skin, mentally, and assume I am another person standing or sitting nearby. Then I ask me to explain what is going on in my head. The thought of that frightened me. Who would understand that I was born just for this!? How could I convince someone that I was not off my rocker?

Examining this, I surmised that I wouldn't really have to convince anyone, so long as I never tried to tell them and thus have to explain it. For the time being, that seemed good enough. But next, I still had to convince myself that I hadn't actually stepped off a mental precipice. I decided to defer that for a while and went on.

Considering the revelation, I began to feel lighter, as if something heavy had been lifted from my body. I stood up and walked around the yard and garden, thinking about the discovery and feeling a growing elation. It wasn't euphoria, just a rising sense of relief. Something positive had occurred!

Metaphysical health was next, so I returned to the chair and pondered this: I was born just for this! could mean "I had been born just for this - the present." We always exist in "the present," not in the past or the future. "This," in its most concise definition, means "The person or thing present or nearby." Empirically, it can mean many things, but that is its narrow meaning. I considered that important enough to think about later, when I had a clearer understanding of what had happened to me.

Religions give great importance to the smallest thing. Even the lesser of animals are regarded as "God's creatures," and are given sacred contexts. To an average person, the statement that "I was born just to assist a skyblue whitewing parakeet during his bout with an often fatal disease and then to lose him to cancer" would sound ridiculous. It would probably sound like an insult to my parents, at the least. So what about the known religious implications of the idea?

Saint Francis of Assisi came to mind. He built a holy order on the principal of helping injured birds. I looked over at the fence where I had long ago hung a cast stone image of St.

Fiacre, Patron Saint of gardeners and taxicab drivers. His cold gray visage clutched a tiny rabbit at his waist. I thought of the dove, another Christian symbol. The Hindus have a special fondness for monkeys and cattle.

Where was this going? I had the feeling that more was being revealed on the heels of I was born just for this!

I went into the house and dug out a book about an old Zen master who preached that everybody was a Buddha. I couldn't find any passages that seemed relevant to what I had discovered. Later, I did, and that's part of the story. Next, I ran through the Bible and found all sorts of connections. In a short time I realized that the relief I was feeling was a combination of emotions, all backed by metaphysical tenets.

I pondered it more and more that afternoon, and as it progressed, so did the clarity of what it all meant.

3. WHAT AN HONOR!

I tried to get some work accomplished. It was Friday afternoon, and my partner, Chris, would be by in an hour to pick up a web site that I had been striving to complete. I turned on the Macintosh and got to work.

It seemed easy. I had no problem wrapping up several complication and creative chunks of the job. Only an hour before I could not make headway on the same project. I cruised through it as if it had been preplanned.

The doorbell bleeped. Chris was here, and I got up to show him in. He carried a basket-potted chrysanthemum with beautiful small yellow flowers. He also handed me an envelope. I opened it. It was a very nice sympathy card from Chris and his wife, Shari, also "signed" by their two dogs "Hobbs" and "Grizzly." I led him into the office and showed him where Beery's coffin rested on my printer. I had pulled open the window blinds and the sun showered over the mahogany box. Beery had spent part of every week day sitting there in his cage, looking out the window for "pretty bird" and chirping and dancing to music from my boom box.

I put the flowers behind the humidior, touching the box.

We covered the project, put it on a disk, and wrapped up our week's business. Then I asked him if he had a minute to listen to what had happened to me that day. He said he did and we went out to sit on the back porch, in the late afternoon shade.

"I'm going to tell you something, Chris. I don't want you to think I am crazy, so please, just listen and hear me out."

He nodded. I told him.

"I was born just for this! It just came up and hit me, like a slap in the face," I said.

"I think it's great!"

I was pleased to hear him agree. Chris had spent many hours discussing Zen with me. I had loaned him many of my books and knew he had devoured their contents. He is also a very practical and level-headed man. I felt that if anyone would serve as a devil's advocate for my story, he would be one of the best.

"What an honor!" I said, my eyes starting to fill with tears. This time, though, they were tears of near joy. Maybe I wasn't crazy, and maybe I could shake the few doubts I still had.

"I think it's a solid idea, and you should keep working on it," he said.

"I believe I should write about it."

"Give it time to gestate, Jon. Think about it when you can, but give yourself time until you feel better about writing it."

"I was born to be Beery's caregiver, to help him through the last part of his short life. That's clear to me. The deeper meaning is just coming together, Chris. I think there's more to it. I think Beery was born to reveal it to me."

It was taking shape now. I waved Chris off for the weekend and turned off the Mac. As the day grew cooler, I wanted to spread the word, to go and tell somebody else. I mentioned it to the cats during their feeding at the edge of the back porch. I told the TV set in the living room as it grew dark and I spun through the channels trying to find anything that would seize my interest.

Lynn and our brother-in-law, Dr. Thomas Carmen, and his three daughters, Erica, Brooke and Lauren, were at Universal Studios. I had expected them to return early in the evening, but knowing those kids, I knew it could be a long and lonely evening. It turned out

that way. About seven-thirty p.m., Lynn called to tell me they were going to stay there for dinner and wouldn't be home too soon.

I fidgeted and walked in and out of the house all evening. I think I wore a path across the concrete driveway, going out and back, until I decided to go out back again. I took along a small snifter of single malt scotch, my pipe, a candle and three joss sticks of incense.

I put them on a lawn table, went back to the porch and got my gas lantern. I fired it up, put it down to illuminate the scene and retrieved a jar that I kept near the ceramic Buddha. I lit the candle, dropped it in and placed it on a flat point among the smooth black stones that surround the statue and Bebop's stone marker. The yellow light flickered on the chubby face and through the surrounding lavender bushes. Then I got the three sticks and one by one lit them from the candle flame.

I stuck the first one in the dirt before the Buddha.

"Thanks for being a very smart man."

The second joss went into the ground touching Bebop's stone.

"Thanks for being with me, especially since yesterday morning."

The last one, I put in near the second.

"This is for you, Beery, if you can hear me. I miss you so very much, but I'm beginning to understand why it hurt so much when you left me."

I kneeled there for a while and went to smoke my pipe and drink the scotch. My mind felt drained, as if I had done my whole senior year of college in that one day. I relaxed as much as I could, but I remember wishing many times that I had some living company.

II. Looking Back

4. BEBOP

Bebop was our friends' budgerigar, or parakeet. When we visited them I always went to his cage and made squeak and chirp sounds. He would light up and reply every time. The bird was a virtually ignored pet, and I was someone who recognized his existence. He loved it!

It was about 1983 or 1984 when our friends gave him to me on my birthday. We already owned several caged birds, all society finches, and Bebop had spent some days and nights near them when our friends were out of town. He enjoyed the visits so much that our friends decided it was time to let him live with us.

I was elated!

He was a bright blue-bellied bird. His wings were white with black mottling, and his eyes were large and clear. He enjoyed the toys we hung in his cage. He had perch rods, a plastic ladder with mirror, bells, hanging balls with tiny bells enclosed in them, and a round yellow-edged mirror. The mirror was his alter ego and center of his attention.

Bebop's first years were spent almost entirely in his cage on a wood drawing board in our bedroom where the windows wrapped around a corner that looked out onto the back porch and yard. Later we carried his cage each morning to the living room where he watched the television all day and could look out the front windows.

As I laced my shoes while sitting on the edge of the bed, I mimicked his chirps and squeaks, and I began to repeat simple words and phrases to him. The first thing I taught him to say was my name, "Jon." His little Donald Duck voice made it sound like "Chawn."

For years we ignored his attempts to speak, but one evening he took a giant leap into diction: My wife would sometimes go to bed early and try to communicate with me in another room. She often shouted, "Can you hear me?" Of course, the bird was only ten feet away from her, and the repetition of her question was loud and clear.

I walked into the bedroom one evening and from his position in the corner, window shades drawn down and the light dimmed, Bebop spoke to us.

"Can you hear me?"

We screamed in amazement!

I used a small tape recorder to getting him to speak for our unbelieving friends and neighbors. He always detected the recorder and refused to utter a word in its presence. Nevertheless, his vocabulary grew. I taught him to call my wife "Geez-Louise." Her name was Lynn, but he could not say it. He picked up Geez-Louise right away. Jon became Jon-Dude after he heard me calling one of our cats by the nickname "Dude." He never said his name as we spoke it. He called himself "Beeby-Ba-Weeby." He called the TV the "Wee-doo," which probably came from what he called the window by his bedroom corner. It was the "Ween-doo." The television looked like a window to him. The cats were "Kee-Kee," and any animals on TV with four legs were "Byew-byews." He learned that from the neighbors' dogs, whose barks resembled the sound.

Over time we tried to count the words in Bebop's vocabulary. We recorded about sixty-five words.

I often worked on the living room couch with the news blaring from the television. Bebop' cage sat on a dry sink at the window, but one day I had him near me on a tray table next to the couch. I was working on a layout with a paper tablet. All of a sudden Bebop

scrambled close to my face, cocked his head and spoke, "Hey Jondude! Beeby-Ba-Weeby ree-wy need the wee-doo!"

I laughed and grabbed the remote to change the channel to a country music station. It was all he ever wanted to watch.

One of our fondest memories of Bebop occurred one night when we were making love. From the corner of the bedroom came his tiny voice: "What are you dooo-ing?"

He punctuated words with the term "really," which he pronounced "ree-wy." I taught it to him by reiterating "You're really, really weird." He also said "Yer ree-ew, ree-ew weird." It was one of his favorite sentences, especially around guests. Our friends were amazed that the little guy could carry on a real conversation, even though the subjects were simple and usually of his choice. He gave us many years of joy and laughter. We shared love, sicknesses, and good times with Bebop. He lived to the ripe old age of sixteen years, which is quite long for an American Budgie.

In 1996, he suffered what we believe was a stroke and never spoke much again. Over the following six months he aged quickly, developed gout and passed away on the night of August 5th. His death coincided with another dear loss in our family. Six days later my wife's younger sister, Sally Wick Carmen, lost her long battle with brain cancer.

5. SALLY

She was my wife's only sister, five years younger and a perfect good-hearted and sweet woman. I only recall seeing Sally angry enough to raise her voice once. Her demeanor was that of a quiet, gentle woman, unmoved by intimidation or threat. She was a wonderful sister-in-law, devoted wife to her husband Tom, and fine mother to three equally beautiful daughters.

Sally Wick and Thomas Carmen were married in Philadelphia while Tom was in medical school at Temple. He did his residency in their home town, Pittsburgh. We often flew to visit them. My memories about Sally and her impact on this book are many, but I will have to encapsulate them as "clips" here.

CLIP: Sometime in the mid nineteen-eighties. We are in Tom and Sally's apartment at Christmas time. They live in an eastern suburb of Pittsburgh. I am helping Sally prepare the holiday dinner. Aromas of roast turkey and cinnamon fill the air. She is just beginning to show her first pregnancy. Erica will be born in June. Everyone in the apartment is happy and we are having a joyful holiday

CLIP: Two years later. I am in Pittsburgh at the end of a business trip. It is February and very cold and wet. Sally and I are entering a supermarket near their first house in Wexford, PA. Erica is a year-and-a-half old and is struggling to get out of the child seat of the shopping cart that Sally is wheeling through the door.

Sally is very pregnant with her second, who will be named Brooke. Erica tumbles out of the seat and smacks her head on the bottom of the metal cage of the cart. I grab her up and rub her forehead, but she erupts with gasps and cries. Sally and I get her calm and are certain the child is not injured. Back she goes into the cart seat and we continue into the store and the warmth of shopping.

CLIP: About a year-and-a-half later. My wife and I get a call from Tom. We listen to his description of how he had been home with Sally, now about five months from the birth of their third daughter, Lauren, when Sally suddenly went into a full-blown epileptic seizure.

Tom bundled her into their car and tore off to a hospital while their neighbors arrived to look after the two children. She was in emergency but she was "stable." The doctors had no idea what caused the episode, but they would do tests.

CLIP: Christmas. Two or three months later. The Wick family is at the Carmens residence for the holiday. We sit in the family room discussing the progress and what is next for Sally. The doctors want to do a biopsy of the tumor they only recently discovered in the right anterior lobe of her brain. It is about the size of an egg. The baby is not due until February, and Tom and Sally want to wait until the birth before consenting to the biopsy procedure.

CLIP: The next Spring. Lauren is a fine baby. Sally's biopsy showed a small amount of malignant cells in the sample. The doctors advised them to await further MRI scans to see if the tumor "changes."

CLIP: Autumn 1994. We are in London celebrating our anniversary. From the basement

of the National Gallery on Trafalgar Square, Lynn telephones Pittsburgh to find out about Sally's latest MRI. Sally has already had one tumor removal surgery, radiation and several bouts of chemotherapy.

CLIP: A year later. 1995. Sally has another "debulking" operation. I am in California when my wife calls from the Cleveland Clinic to inform me that the procedure was successful. I hold the telephone in my hand and a few feet away the television is showing the Cleveland Indians pulverizing the New York Yankees in the American League Championship Series.

CLIP: December 30, 1995. Their Wexford home is packed with friends and relatives for our surprise 35th birthday party for Sally. Lynn and her sister are shopping and the house is hushed, curtains drawn, awaiting their entry at the front door. I stand outside in the bitter winter air with a camcorder to film the event. The car arrives and the two women get out.

"What are you doing?" Sally asks.

"Shooting the holiday lights around the neighborhood," I lie. Then I ring the doorbell twice - the signal for those inside to be ready.

I open the door and step backward into the foyer. My camera is recording. Sally follows me in, twisting her earlobe between thumb and finger as the guests shout "SURPRISE!"

CLIP: March 1996. San Francisco. We meet the Wick parents, and Sally and Tom for the annual meeting of the American Brain Tumor Association. During the visit we go to the offices of one of the nation's leading brain surgeons at San Francisco State University. His prognosis is disheartening. At the conference a speaker asks one-year tumor survivors to stand up or show their hands. About a hundred in the audience respond. Then he asks for a show of two-year survivors. Half that number stand. Then three-years: about twenty five. Four years and five: Only a few show hands. Finally he asks for six-year survivors: Sally and one other person stand up proud. The audience applauds.

CLIP: April. Sally has her third and last surgery. She is on much heavier chemotherapy. Lynn, who is a perfect blood-type match, gives platelets for Sally as often as she is allowed. We begin "tag-teaming" on trips to Pittsburgh to help out. My mother comes to Long Beach to help us with the house and the pets. I teach her how to feed the cats and to do Bebob's seeds and water. The bird is weak. I ask her to monitor him carefully while I am gone.

CLIP: May. I take Sally to Passavant Hospital for platelets. She is very weak and her blood cell count is a record low. For two or three agonizing hours she endures the transfusion. I sit holding her hand and talking to her most of the afternoon.

CLIP: June. It is my third trip to help in Wexford. I sleep in Brooke's room at the end of the second floor hall. Sally slips and falls in the ground floor bathroom one day. From that time on she must be carried in a chair or lifted in someone's arms.

CLIP: July. I am about to leave again for PA. Bebob is getting weaker by the day. I spend a lot of time with him near me in my office.

CLIP: Late July. Wexford. I sleep on the floor next to Sally and Tom's bed. When Sally needs the bathroom, Tom or I get up and carry her. Lynn calls to say she is coming in a day or

two. Bebop is very bad. Can I return to California? I phone for a reservation.

CLIP: The Wick parents are leaving for their home in Tennessee and will drop me at the Pittsburgh airport. They believe Sally has much more time. I know better. As we pull away from the house I wave at her. She waves back from the storm door and I try to choke down the tears. I know I will never see her again.

CLIP: He lived for almost three days after I got home. I cut a rose and placed it next to him on the towel at the bottom of his cage. Later that day I put him in a wood pipe box with a brass clasp. I laid a lock of my hair, a photo of Lynn, Bebop and me, a note about him, and a seed dish in the coffin. The most precious item he "owned" - His mirror - went in next. I closed the lid and wrapped the box in layers of taped Visquine plastic. Then I completely covered it all with layers of duct tape. He sat on the dry sink with a vase of roses and his little framed photos for another day. Then I went to the black stone Buddha in the back garden and dug a very deep hole.

I burned candles for two days and nights, along with many joss sticks.

I was already mourning our bird when Lynn called five days later and told me that Sally was gone. We had two angels in our family in one week.

Years ago I lost my father. I lost a very loved cat about a year later. My experience with close grief had been painful. Dealing with it took time, but I thought I handled it well. In August 1996 I thought it was difficult but that I worked it through with dignity and compassion.

I had no idea that my method was incomplete and insufficient.

6. BEERY

We returned to Long Beach after Sally's funeral. My wife disappeared into her CPA office, returning in the evening to sit at the kitchen table watching I Love Lucy re-runs while I cooked dinner. I threw myself into my design business and tried to fill my mind with layouts and copywriting. Except for the cats we had at the time, the house seemed empty. It was. I took Bebob's cage to the garage and boxed away his food and toys. The drawing board was replaced with a new white clothes dresser. I swept up the seed hulls.

Three weeks later, Lynn called me from her office.

"My receptionist brought this parakeet to the office. He's on my desk. It belonged to her brother but they have a baby now and don't want the bird. He's another blue one. Very pretty colors. What do you think? Do you want to come and see it?"

He was a very large, one-and-a-half year old English Budgie. English types can be identified by their beard just below the beak, their relatively large bodies and some differences in talons size, coloration patterns and head feathers. American Budgies are smaller and while they also come in blue, green, yellow and white, with mixes of the same colors, they have less pronounced beards and fewer downy feathers. This parakeet had a light blue belly and almost pure white wings, a 'Skyblue Whitewing.'

He was named Buddy, but when I leaned toward his cage and called him, the bird ran to me on his wooden perch and replied, "Beery!" Then he followed with "Beery-Bird!"

I said that I wanted him. Then I said to him, "O.K. You will be Beery-Bird."

He hopped and bobbed his head with glee.

The next day, I drove him to our avian veterinary in Hawthorne for his initial checkup. The vet weighed him at 54 grams, an astounding size and weight for a budgerigar! He got a passing grade and we went home.

Lynn and I began a new routine with this bird. Every night he went to the bedroom corner where his cage mated to a round elevated wire stand in the window. We partially covered his cage with a towel and put a night light in an outlet below the cage. His adjustment was quick. In the morning he went to the kitchen where I cleaned, re-lined his cage floor with scissor-cut paper towels and replaced his seeds and bottled water. Then he went to the living room where Bebob had sat and watched TV all day. Sometimes I brought him into my office and he sat in the window where he talked to the blue jays outside and sang to the recordings from my CD player. Each evening he went to the kitchen and sat on the table. Lynn and I adored Beery right away!

We rearranged his perches. The vet warned me about birds of such size getting bumblefoot, caused by frequent jumping from perch to perch. We twist-coated his perches with blue flannel, taped down at the ends. He enjoyed the revisions. I put a mirror at one end of the mid-level perch. He saw the his reflected image in the glass and cautiously approached it, side-stepping two hops forward and one backward. When he examined the interloper, he thought it was another bird and tried to flip the mirror around to catch the bird behind the glass. He realized it was trapped inside the mirror and he loved to peck at the "bird" with his beak. Soon he named the alter ego "Bubby-Bird."

Beery was a vocal animal and began talking right away! In a few days he called me Jondude and Lynn was again Geez-Louise. Over the next few months, he modified her name into "Beery's Gee." It took very little to teach him words. Soon he began to speak in complex sentences. We were thrilled!

The care and feeding of caged birds is crucial to their good health. Wild birds are not

usually kept in cages, and for good reason: Their habitat has no bounds. They range far and wide looking for sustenance. Seeds and water in dishes do not look like food to them. The wire bars are borders to defeat, even if it means thrashing themselves to death. Most legal pet birds have never been in the wild, and their habitat from birth has always been limited by the cage. They are dependent on man to provide for them. They cannot roam and forage.

The selection of a cage should depend on the type and size of bird. Advice from bird breeders and pet shop owners is valuable here. Large hook beaks such as parrots and macaws require large, hard-cage habitats. These birds have powerful jaws and can quickly gnaw through simple wire barriers. A good rule of cage size is this: It should measure in height roughly four times the head-to-tail length of the bird. Even more is preferable if the bird is not allowed out of the cage to a free perch. Smaller birds require a larger ratio of space-to-size. They are more active and love to jump, climb or fly about. The loose rule for parakeets is to find a cage two-and-a-half to three feet high and about half that distance wide. It should be fitted with two or three levels of wooden perches that run the diameter of the cage. Food and water dishes should be located around the cage, up and down, to provide accessible feeding points. If the cage is large enough, a swing may be located at the top. It should have free room to arc and rotate without obstruction. The cage floor should be removable and lined with paper, cut to fit. You should replace the paper daily or at least often enough that fecal odor is not present. In a pinch, two or three days will suffice.

A note about parakeet feces: Budgie poop is a great indicator of the bird's health. They deposit both alimentary and urinary waste in the same drop. You will see round ejecta, usually black and white, that resemble little "yin-yang" shapes, or the drops will have black or white outer rounds with white or black centers. This usually indicates the bird healthy. If one color dominates, or if the darker color turns green, something is wrong! The exception to that rule is if the bird consumes vegetation such as carrot tops, sprouts or other green vegetable material. The best advice is to withhold vegetable greens if the fecal color change persists. In a day or two the black and white color should return. If it does not, take the bird to an avian veterinary.

Cages should be kept clean. Every few weeks owners should wipe the wires or bars clean with a damp rag or clean damp sponge. A very dilute solution of water and bleach may be used - but with caution. The amount of bleach should be tiny! It will be a noticeable odor that the bird may not enjoy. After the initial swipes, use a clean, water-only cloth or sponge to wipe the cage a second time. Keep the floor extra clean. The perches should be kept free of fecal matter, too. Make certain to locate water and seed dishes where fecal matter will not fall. Mirrors and toys should be cleaned often.

Much has been written about the danger of using non-stick cooking vessels in homes with caged birds. I accept the fact that most homes have and use these pots and pans. I have them in my own home, but when I use them the bird is in another room with the door shut. After cooking, I always ventilate the kitchen, hallways and other rooms to disperse the gas created by using the equipment. A common material used to coat non-stick pots and pans will give off a gas when overheated (near or above 500 degrees Fahrenheit) and it can be fatal to birds. Crisp fried bacon is even more deadly to your buddy than to you!

Another danger to caged birds is the use of pesticides and sprays in the yard and garden. When using these chemicals, always close doors and windows and keep them shut until the following day. Indoor sprays are very dangerous to birds and other small pets. If you must spray for ants or fleas in the home, remove the bird to another location until the home has been completely ventilated.

I am not an avian vet. My advice is based on years of pet ownership. I have no credentials other than that experience. Consult your veterinarian about these and other matters concerning your bird's health and care. Many sources of information are available free of charge. Your vet has printed cautionary material about the subjects. Ask for it. Books about raising pets are available in stores and pet shops. Much information is accessible via the internet, but be advised that only a small portion of what you find on the web is accurate. The internet is rife with rumor, falsehoods and outright lies. Be careful to check for confirmation with reliable sources.

7. THE GIFTY BIRD

In a very short time, Bebob could rest in peace. Beery took over our home. The adage that the best way to endure the loss of a pet was to find another one was true! Although we missed our dear old companion, we were overwhelmed by the new presence. I framed a small photograph of Bebob and put it on a living room cabinet.

We mourned Sally. Our thoughts centered on her family. Nearly every night my wife was on the telephone to her mother and father or talking to Tom and his young daughters. We sat at our kitchen table and Lynn usually did the long distance talks. I listened and had Beery's cage on the table at my face.

His chatter and banter was a counterpoint to my wife's conversations. His little beard puffed out at me and he ran on and on with his discourse. One night he said something profound and I was stunned!

"Jondude! You're goofy!"

I leaned around the cage toward Lynn.

"Did you hear that?"

She shook her head and continued to speak into to the telephone.

Eyeball to eyeball I asked him, "Jondude what?"

"You're goofy!" He repeated.

She had been coaching him with, "Jon's goofy." I had heard her do it many nights. Beery picked it up and also constructed it as an exclamation. He used my nickname first, and in the repetition he used the "you are" contraction! When Lynn finished I asked him the question while she listened.

"Who is goofy?"

Beery said clearly, "You're goofy!"

About a year later a friend visited us from Ohio. He sat at the table one evening and was not very receptive to our claims about the bird's vocabulary and intelligence. While face-to-face with Beery, Walt listened and Lynn told the bird that our guest was goofy.

Beery hopped across the cage and faced Walt, then pronounced, "You're goofy!"

When he returned to Ohio, my friend and his wife went out and bought a budgie. They named him Kiwi.

In the bedroom we developed a nightly routine. After the lights were out, either Lynn or I threw kissing noises in the room. After a time Beery would repeat them. "Smooch!" He soon developed it into a game. We would wait for him to begin. Beery would throw a kiss and one of us would reply with one. Then he would wait a few minutes and do it twice. We replied the same number of times. This went on until we fell asleep.

One night I squeaked a tiny bird whistle instead. Beery replied, and the game expanded. By the third year of his life Beery had dropped the kissing sounds in favor of the cheeps and whistles. He never missed a night.

I tried to teach him to say "Nighty-night." The only time he ever tried it, it came out like "Ninety-nine." Whenever the Goodyear blimp sailed over the back yard on its way to Anaheim Stadium, Beery would shout, "Big Burrito!" We couldn't recall ever teaching him to say that!

One day he was out on the back porch hook. I heard him chattering. When I went out to see him he scrambled to the side of his cage near my face and puffed out his chest, his top crest feathers sticking up like a crown.

"Jondude! Beery see pretty bird. He's soooo cute!"

Beery was a gifted animal. His intelligence was astounding. I realize some readers will maintain denial about this. Creeds and beliefs have stated that animals do not possess souls and therefore cannot express feelings like love, sadness and regret. I know better because of Beery.

We tried to hand-train him. It failed. Beery did not like a hand in or near the cage. He did not enjoy caressing, or kissing, skin or noses like our first parakeet. Any attempt to project flesh near his hooked bill would result in a quick and painful bite. He drew blood from fingers and noses, lips and cheeks many time before we gave it up. He was content to carry on conversations, perform tricks, and enjoyed our relative company, but the cage was his territory and we soon learned to respect that.

When in my office studio, he loved to sit on a cabinet at a large set of double windows. Blue jays would come to the side fence and chatter with him. He mimicked their cries like a recording. He also developed a sophisticated taste in music. His favorite CD was my Supertramp Live in Paris recording. I had to play it daily. He actually danced and bobbed his head to the songs. He also loved a record of arias by Luciano Pavrotti. He had a good ear for tunes.

The television that he enjoyed was almost identical to Bebop. He wanted country music, rock and roll, classical and absolutely hated rap music and talking head news people.

All my birds have "owned" music boxes. Bebop enjoyed a silver piano-shaped box that played Amazing Grace. I still have it, after being repaired several times at great expense. My current budgie, Bisbee-Bird, would sit and listen to it for hours if I allowed it. The spring only lets it play for about three minutes.

Beery loved Christmas. My wife was a great holiday decorator. We had a large tree in the corner of our living room. Another was put up and trimmed on the front porch. She always found a "Charlie Brown" tree for the bedroom dresser that sat near where Beery slept at night. The small tree was about two feet high and just as wide. He loved the pretty lights and bird-oriented decorations. Around the tree Lynn arranged toy soldiers, Santas and little reindeer. We had several holiday music boxes and "snowballs" with wind-up Christmas or winter tunes. Every night we played each one for him. He danced and bobbed to the music.

Christmas morning became a ritual. Beery was situated on a board we placed over the corner of a love seat near the tree and our wrapped presents. He carried on a running commentary as we opened the gifts and hugged each other. We always gave our pets gifts, too. The cats were allowed into the house when we gave them their little bags of toys, catnip and treats. Beery loved to watch the spectacle as the felines tore at wrapping paper and engaged themselves with loose ribbon and bows. We always hung little holiday tree balls on his cage.

My wife always gave me a gift "signed" by the cats and Beery. The tag had tiny bird foot marks. She also made me a laminated bookmark with his discarded blue and white feathers. I treasure it. On each St. Valentine's Day I a got a card from him. I kept them all. I have a storage box full of birthday cards "from" all my pets.

We were very close to our critters. I was about to become even closer to Beery. What occurred entering his fourth year of life changed me forever.

8. SOMETHING'S WRONG!

I have volumes of photographs of Beery. One picture is my favorite. My friend Chris was visiting. We sat on lawn chairs near the back door under the roof soffit. On warm days I brought Beery's cage to the back porch and hung it there. The hook was fastened to a wooden clothes rail that I had suspended on pulleys near the protruding rafters of the overhang. It gave him an outdoor experience where he could talk with the "pretty birds," as he called all wild birds. The bottom of his cage hung about four and a half feet from the porch surface.

My 35mm camera was with me that day and I had already taken several photos of Beery in his cage. One showed him grasping a long cowbell strap with one talon. He would shake the strap and ring the loud bell. Another had him on his top perch, ringing his tiny green bell with one foot. Another showed him ringing the same bell with his beak.

Chris asked me to pose with Beery while he took a picture. I stood left of the cage with my face close to it. Beery hopped to the front, faced me and looked at Chris while he made the shot. It is an astounding photograph. I have it printed in several sizes and it is framed and hanging on more than one wall. Like two buddies we stare out at the viewer. It seemed as if nothing could separate us!

We had been to the vet in December when Beery developed a sneeze. He was checked and pronounced fit, and the doctor had drawn blood for tests. The cold went away and everything settled back to normal.

In late January I noticed his feces had turned dark and viscous. It was unusual. Beery also grew listless. He stopped talking and ruffled his feathers as if he was cold. I called our vet and drove him there.

We waited for over an hour in the lobby before the doctor could see us. I was concerned because Beery had no spirit. When the examination was over, the doctor handed me a brochure about an avian illness called Psittacosis, or Parrot's Disease. It described a terrible fate for our bird. Parrot's Disease is usually fatal. It is a form of bird Chlamydia. In the past, birds that developed Psittacosis were exterminated. That had changed, said the veterinarian, because there were some recent treatments for it. However, it was extremely contagious. Even humans could catch a form of the disease. I was told what to do.

He gave Beery a shot in his little chest and I took him home. For the next few weeks I cleaned his cage carefully every morning. I replaced his papers twice each day and monitored his progress.

He did not improve.

we went back to the vet several more times. Each visit saw more handling, more injections and seemingly less hope. Some time in February they handed me a vial of medicine and several syringes. They showed me how to inject the medicine into his chest muscles. I would have to do it about once a week for at least five weeks!

We returned to Long Beach from the vet's office in Hawthorne, a distance of about twenty miles. I dreaded what lay ahead, and my mind raced with the horrible possibility of losing him. Beery clutched the perch as we drove past a car dealer that always had a barrage balloon floating on a tether above their lot. He saw the balloon and managed to squeak, "Big Burrito!" It gave me me a little hope.

Friends were over one evening about a week later. It was time for his first needle. I prepared the hypodermic and got Beery out of his cage in one hand. Carefully, I attempted to administer the shot, but it was difficult. He bit my hand and thrashed for freedom. Eventually I got the needle into a muscle in his breast, but it was a botched job. He went back in the cage

and I vowed I would not put him through my amateur doctoring again. The next morning I fired our veterinarian and called around Long Beach looking for other solutions.

9. PSITTACOSIS

Someone told me to go see Dr. Tia Greenberg at Long Beach Animal Hospital. I made an appointment, bundled Beery's cage into my car, and took him to see her. We waited in the car for their office to open that morning. I recall he wanted me to pull up the towel that covered his cage, which sat on the passenger seat wrapped with the buckled-up safety belt. I opened his view and he immediately saw a row of pigeons above the windshield, sitting on telephone wires. He said, "Jondude. Beery see pretty bird."

We stood in an examination room. Dr. Greenberg was young and pretty. She had been watching me with Beery, explaining the process and asking me about his previous treatment.

"You two have really bonded," she commented.

"We're very good buds," I said.

"It will be a tough couple of months, but it's necessary. Today we'll take a blood sample and run tests. We should also X-ray him."

They took his cage away and I left. On the way home I did something I hadn't done in decades. I parked at a neighborhood church and sat in a back pew for an hour. I was the only person in the sanctuary, except for the one you can never see.

It did me good.

When I got home the animal hospital had left a message on my phone. He was ready. I drove to get Beery.

"You said he weighed fifty-four grams in December," the doctor said.

I nodded.

"He's lost body mass. He weighs forty-two grams today," she said. I softly held Beery in my hands. It was something that had recently become routine. He never allowed us to hold him until he got sick. His head was tucked against my neck, where he "nested."

"Here's what we have to do. Bring him back a week from today for his second shot. He will need one each week for five to six weeks. In the old days, this treatment wasn't available, but things have changed. Now, instead of destroying birds with Psittacosis, the treatment will cure them in some cases. I believe we got him in here early enough that it will work with Beery. Just be sure to clean the cage regularly and monitor his condition. By the way, the X-ray was O.K. Nothing seems out of place. And keep him warm and this is very important - keep him inside the house."

I thanked her, paid the bill and we returned to a quiet and depressing house.

In a week we returned for Beery's second injection. He loved the lobby. They kept a loud large white Cockatoo near the front door in a massive iron cage. Beery tried to chatter with the bird, but his voice was not strong. His condition had not changed.

In the terrible month that followed I scrubbed his cage daily, made sure he stayed warm, and I spent much of my free time sitting with him and trying to get him to talk. Only a few simple "Jondudes," reached my ears. Each time we visited the vet she commented on how close the bird and I were. Each time we discussed his progress, Beery nested against my neck in the sterile little room.

My wife had withdrawn some distance from our pet during the period. She spent less time trying to exchange gibberish with him in the kitchen. It was her way of dealing with it, and I understood. The bond was with me, not her.

By the fifth week Beery had regained some weight and much spirit. He spoke frequently and in the morning was active and ready for seeds and water. All our spirits improved. It was working! One day Dr. Greenberg pronounced him fit and ready to stay at home. No more

injections! She commented that if she ever returned to life as a pet, she wanted me to be her owner.

"I would be so lucky to be your pet," she said. "If only more people took such good care with their animals I would not have such a difficult job here."

Beery and I thanked her and promised to return in a month for a check-up. We drove home, chattering at each other and noting pretty birds along the streets. He was back and so was I!

May and June of 1998 were filled with joy and celebration. Beery regained his routine. On warm days he joined me on the back porch for coffee breaks with Blue Jays. I took many more photos of him. He loved to pose for the camera, and I loved to catch him acting out his play. I bought him a few more toys and replaced his old ball-on-a-string with a brand new one. The cleaning routine became normal and less frequent. His weight zoomed again and everything in our little universe was right. We had beaten Parrot's Disease together, and the future was possible again.

I inventoried our bonding: For months I had suffered the despair of his decline. While Beery struggled with the illness, I battled the depression that held me in its constant grip. Determined to fight the battle and with the hope Dr. Greenberg had brought to the task, my thoughts and prayers had been focused on my bird and finding a cure. Nothing else mattered to me during those months. Although my work demanded my time and creative energy, Beery was the center of my attention from dawn to bedtime.

The Spring brought a realization that love and good animal husbandry can prevail. We were back and we enjoyed that second chance! The house sprang to life with the sound of "Jondude! Beery's-Gee!" and "You're goofy!"

10. GRASSHOPPERS

One day during Beery's illness and treatment, I had gone out to meditate. In our back yard, at the midway point of the back border garden, the lawn grass was defined by a curve of brick boundary that pointed at the rear redwood fence. A giant Strelitzia Nikolai, or white bird of paradise, grew near the fence, An array of equally large cactus stood to the left. A large flat white rock sat at my left knee, surrounded by smooth back beach rocks and redwood ground cover, Off my right knee were a cluster of Lavender bushes. Directly to my front was a sitting black Buddha, under the sheltering fronds of the palm-like Bird of Paradise. I sometimes meditated there, sitting on the grass.

My eyes were full of despair and tears. All seemed hopeless. Beery was not improving at the time and I did not know what to do. I asked for guidance from God and help from inside to get me through the terror. I even asked for a sign.

"What can I do? Is there something you can tell me to do? Anything!"

A grasshopper flew out of the lavender and stopped on my right shoulder. I turned my head and prepared to smash it. Grasshoppers had plagued my garden that year and the summer before. I would kill them in tens, and it never bothered me to get rid of them. Before I could react to the insect, it leaped across the space between me and my Buddha and came to rest on the statue's bald black head.

What happened next I can only try to describe. Sudden, as if out of an opened door, a breeze came over the fence and brushed my face. My tears dried as if the Santa Ana winds had commenced. My skin bristled. I felt a great relief throughout my body, and I got light as a feather.

The grasshopper stared over at me from the top of Buddha's shiny head. I had been given a sign! I never killed a grasshopper again! Live and let live was the message. God in his high place had asked me to let it live. I received the sign and made my silent promise.

A bargain had been made. Beery improved from then on.

III. The Bond

11. HEALED!

Joy was rampant. Supertramp played. Blue Jays squawked and Beery returned their greetings. Hummingbirds flitted around our faces. The evening kitchen was full of happiness and laughter. Beery would even consent to let my hand into his cage without ripping skin from it. He hopped and chattered. He talked incessantly. I feared he would burn himself out!

My work got better and I allowed the grasshoppers to ravage my Spring crop of beets. They did avoid the early radishes and spinach. My cats seemed pleased with the arrangement. They loved to jump and chase the insects, and there were plenty to try to catch.

Lynn got back into form with Beery and spent many hours over light beer, dinner and TV in the kitchen, with the bird at her face, trumpeting his banter. We coached him to come out of his cage for a "fly." With the dangerous elements in the room covered by towels, he would exit his cage by jumping down to the opened door, looking around, then leaping into the air and flying in continuous loops around the two hanging light shades that became his race course pylons. His wings beat so hard that soft feathers snowed down on the kitchen floor. When he tired, Lynn grabbed a small towel in both hands and stood. Beery would land in her soft hands and she would put him back in his cage.

She could feel he had regained most of his former weight.

All was bright and wonderful in our little home. The bond between Beery and me had become a permanent friendship. I carried him with me everywhere in the house. One day I buckled his cage into my car and took him for a ride in the neighborhood so he could see the pigeons on the high wires. He enjoyed the trip.

We often entertained friends. The back lawn became my kitchen on these occasions. I rolled my smoker-barbecue onto a corner of the grass, Lynn set the picnic table, and we enjoyed smoked and barbecued brisket with Texas toast, sausages and steak. Beery loved our picnics and hung from his hook until evening, when I carried him to the living room dry sink and his "wee-doo." As we enjoyed our garden dinners he would engage us with his conversation, punctuated by "Jondudes, Beery's-Gees" and occasionally, "Beery see Big-Bird!"

Big-Bird was any airplane, even a high-flying jet. He especially loved the small aircraft that towed advertising banners. They were described as "Ree-woy Big Birds."

That May and June were warm and sunnier than usual for Long Beach. June gloom became June joy for the three of us. We had beaten Psittacosis. We had done it together, Beery and I. We had life by the hand and we celebrated it.

12. PROMISES MADE AND KEPT

About the last week of June I noticed a slight change in his demeanor. Although he talked and hopped about normally, his feces was a slightly viscous and dark. I called the doctor and asked if I should return him for examination. She asked me to monitor him over that weekend and report any changes.

On Monday he had shown no improvement, nor did he seem worse. She said to keep watching him and pay particular attention to his stool shape and content. In a few days I noticed the remains of seed hulls in his stool.

"I want you to leave him here overnight," Dr. Greenberg said. "We'll give him an X-ray and do some more tests. I don't think the disease has returned. His stool doesn't have the same indications. It could be something else."

I agreed and walked with her to the back laboratory where the tests would be accomplished. She promised he would be all right and that he could remain in his own cage during the overnight stay. I said goodbye to Beery and he jumped into my hand. He wanted to go home with me.

That night I went to the back yard and lit a Jahrzeit candle. It burned on the smooth stones in front of my Buddha. I also lit a joss stick and prayed for Beery. The night was full of dreams of him. I recall he was quiet and didn't move about in the dreams.

The next morning I called the vet.

"We can't tell you anything yet. I looked at his X-rays and don't see anything wrong. I am sending them to my old professor up at U.C. Davis. Maybe she has an idea about what is wrong with Beery."

She stood in the exam room where I sat with Beery in my hands, again nestled against my neck. When I had arrived I went to his cage in the back. He was trying to raise the cage door with his talon, and as soon as I got it up he flew right into my hand. The little guy was really glad to see me. The separation, even for one night, has distressed him as much as me.

"I really want to be reborn as one of your birds," the doctor said again.

The following days were sad and I concentrated on work. He was quiet and I had put a heating pad under his cage. When Dr. Greenberg called and asked me to come to her office I bundled Beery carefully into the car and left with trepidation.

"Give him the medicine daily with the plastic hypodermic. Make sure the dosage is correct. It will help him endure any pain from the tumor," she said.

He snuggled at my neck. I felt his little head trying get even closer to me. My eyes were sore and stained with tears.

The tumor was in his gut. It would be fatal. We didn't know how long it would take, but Beery would die. I thanked her and took him home for the last time.

The next weeks were focused on our bird. I fed him the medicine daily. He became weak and disheveled, his chin and face discolored by the prescription. Beery never uttered another word, or even a sound beyond a squeak. His weight had dropped to twenty-eight grams! I spent much time with him, just talking to him and praying next to his cage.

We had defeated an almost certain death from Psittacosis, only to be trumped by cancer. It was nearly too much for all of us.

On the night of July 29th, I could tell he didn't want me to turn out the light and go to sleep. I stayed up with him, sitting on the corner of our bed, keeping him company. Soon, he tucked his head back under his wing and I covered the top of his cage with his towel.

In the morning my wife had to drive one of our cars down to Orange County for a tune

up. When she left I was in the kitchen with Beery. I opened his cage door to replace his seeds, he immediately crawled into my hand and nested. I carried him right away to the living room couch and with both hands held him close to my neck. He struggled to be comfortable and belly-down came to rest in the cradle my hands provided. In a few minutes he rolled to his side, straightened his legs behind him and closed his eyes. When his tail feathers stopped trembling, I said goodbye to my best friend forever.

I held him for a long time. Then I got up and carried him out to his cage. I set him on a clean white towel, cleaned his cage, and put the towel and Beery on its floor. I took the cage to the bedroom and went out to cut a rose.

My body shook with paroxysms of tears and grief.

When he died, I was seized immediately in a clutch of despair I had never felt before. Even though I had been mentally prepared for it, I was surprised by the intensity of my emotional collapse. I had no appetite all day. I tried to complete a project that was due the next morning, but couldn't focus on the work. The fact that I work at home magnified the loneliness I felt, and it was fortunate that we had visitors arriving the very night of the day he died.

Why did it affect me like no other death in my life? What caused me to feel the loss so acutely that I could not hold back the tears? Beery had been with us only a few years. How could my feelings about this little bird have grown so much in so short a period? I needed to understand the reasons for my emotional trauma before I could hope to cope with the loss.

The first two days, a period of numbing shock and heartache, were critical. They resulted in the first of two revelations. Those two discoveries amounted to a personal enlightenment that was the stimulus for this book. I want to share it with anyone who has ever experienced the terrible grief that comes with the death of a loved one, animal or human. "I was born just for this!"

IV. The Second Revelation

13. THE TRANSFERENCE

Few understood my grief over the death of a little bird. I tried to explain my feelings to few, because of the stigma that emotional expression has earned in this society. *Grown men crying was not good form*. It is generally considered a sign of weakness to show emotional trauma, tears or intense bewilderment, all handmaidens of death and loss. My colleague, Chris, understood. He and Shari have Labrador Retrievers and they had recently lost their dear Hobbes. My wife understood at first, but in the long shadow of Sally's death, she came to resent my feelings about Beery. Our last two years had been tough and saw frequent bouts of tears and anguish connected to Sally's passing. Coupled with growing difficulties in our union, it seemed at times fruitless to even bring up the bird's death around my her. I had to confront the loss by myself.

At the time I could not have cared less whether anyone understood. I didn't, and that was all that counted to me. For about three weeks I could barely bring myself to my work tasks. I didn't feel like cooking. The kitchen was rife with tragic memories. The bedroom corner still held his empty cage. My office held no music. I banished Supertramp to a shelf and forgot the sound.

On the day that Chris visited and I spoke about my revelation, about being born just for what had happened, my transference began.

Transference. The act of conveying, shifting or changing from one person, place or thing to another. In this case, I use the term to describe how I transferred my grief into something that would help others to recover from emotional trauma similar to that which I had experienced. I decided to write down everything that had occurred, to get it all on paper so that when my creative energy allowed I could make some sense out of what I went through and what I felt.

With a call to Dr. Greenberg, she agreed to give me copies of Beery's medical records, so I could have benchmarks and dates to use. I gathered all his photographs and put them in a handy box. I sat on my back porch chair and tried to make a plan.

Shortly after that I wrote the first introduction to this book. Right after that I got very busy with work, but the basic elements of recovery fell into place despite my career duties. I was transferring my grief into many forms of action, but other events interceded to make it a more unintentional act.

Three and a half weeks after Beery's death, I stood in the kitchen and sipped coffee at the front window. My neighbor Tom drove into his side of our common driveway. He got out of the truck and carried something to the front door of my house. I met him before he pushed the doorbell.

"You've been down in the dumps so bad since Beery passed away that I had to do something. Here." He handed me a small cardboard container.

I opened the lid and found a blue, black and white American Budgie, just a few weeks old! It's head stripes were all the way down to his beak, and I knew it was very young. It stared in surprise at its new owner.

I went to the garage and brought in a new cage and stand. I had bought it from a friend for Beery, but he refused it. I had been out there for months. We opened the new bird's box at the cage's door and he immediately flew in, found the cage side and scrambled to the very top. He hung like a bat and began to look around the living room. He did that most of the

day!

I thanked Tom and he excused himself to go to work. I could see he was pleased that my demeanor had changed. Tom will always have a special place in my pantheon of personal heroes for what he did that day.

I spent a little time with the new guy - it was a "he," and I went to the bedroom to remove Beery's old cage. I took the stand to the garage, but I carried the cage into my office and hung it on a ceiling hook in a corner of the room. It was placed so I could see the little green bell every day. When I returned to the living room, I called my wife and told her what had arrived. She seemed put off but accepted the fact. I told her I wanted to name him "Bubby," after Beery's mirror bird, his alter ego, whom he had named.

Transference had occurred. Recovery was just beginning.

Over the next few days I was amazed at Bubby's coming. He took to Lynn in a big way. She immediately began using her hand inside the cage, now filled with rings, bells, perches and other colorful apparatus. Bubby soon would climb into or on her hand, play with his hanging ball and chatter at us. We got him a "play pen" and sat the square wooden thing outside his cage door, coaxing him out with clover sprouts. He soon climbed its ladder, swung on its swing, and generally enjoyed the treat. He was full of energy, a young bird discovering the joys of owning two humans who paid attention to him!

I arranged Beery's photos chronologically in a photo album. I framed a few of his pictures and placed them near Bebob's. One day I retrieved the Supertramp CD and put it on the player. It was good to hear the music, even without Beery's attempts to keep in tune with the notes. I soon stopped putting flowers at his grave. I put away the candles. In a month or two, my grief had subsided to a point where I could easily deal with a few moments of it a few days a week.

I mentioned that I faced Beery's loss relatively alone. Death in the family is an emotion packed with singularity. Each person has to confront his or her own emotional trauma in relative isolation. The key is that *you must confront it*. You cannot pass grief off to someone else. You should not sublimate the feelings that it delivers. You must face it and beat it!

14. THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING

Understanding. The quality of discernment, comprehension. When someone or something hands you understanding as a gift of knowing them or loving them, you are blessed doubly. First, the person or thing is a true friend or something of an angel, and you are blessed to have a connection with them. Second, you are blessed with the great gift of Gods and Intellect. Understanding is arriving at a point where you can consider the object in question as it exists in reality, fixed in place by definition and sorted out by clear thinking.

We live in a world that perpetually changes. Daily we are assaulted by media, technology, fear, suspicion, economic mishaps, grass that never stops growing and many other touch points that can produce pain. Our lives are tainted by emotional and physical challenges that never cease to bother. The loss of a loved one or pet is one of the most tragically difficult events in anyone's life. It rankles with hardship and seems that it will dominate our lives forever.

Understanding death, loss and the grief process is nearly impossible unless you find *your personal ways* to overcome the trauma and go on. Beery's death provided me with the understanding to do that. I had suffered losses before. I had lost a young girlfriend, school friends, Army friends, extended and close family, my sister-in-law, but it took a little bird to teach me how to deal with a loss that nearly broke my heart.

To surmount the tragedy of loss there are many ways to start your recovery. Some will seek counseling from a psychiatrist, psychologist or family counselor. If you already have an established relationship with one, that's a very good beginning. Counseling can help you help yourself, and it is nothing to be ashamed or afraid of. If I had known a good one in 1998, I would have gone for help.

Instead, I went through the processes on my own volition, with little help from outside my own heart and mind. It was a lonely process. How you deal with your loss depends on how well you can manage the steps. If your progress falters, then by all means seek professional help.

Understanding death, the end of the life process, is a first step. Everyone perishes. Nobody will live forever. Our pets will leave this life before most of us. It is a fact to remember. You may think that you will be prepared to deal with a death should it arrive, but death knows no schedule. It comes with the suddenness of an earthquake or tidal wave. We are never really prepared for it.

I have made a list of preparatory considerations that you can think about *now*, that may help when the day of a pet's loss arrives. Here they are, not necessarily in order of priority:

WHAT TO DO BEFORE YOUR PET DIES

1. Take plenty of photographs of your pet. You'll regret not doing it.
2. Plan on what to do with your pet's remains. Cremation? Burial? Where?
3. Think about whether or not you will get another pet.
4. Remind yourself and your family that pet lifespans are generally brief.

Let's cover these one-by-one.

1. Take plenty of photographs of your pet. Most families keep albums of their photos. I have mine cataloged by subject. First there are the immediate family pictures. They were of my wife and myself. They covered entertaining, decor and holidays, new cars, the interior changes we made in our home's structure, family visits, short trips and vacations and more. Next, I kept albums of our pet photos. We also had albums of gardens from year-to-year, vacations abroad, and even albums dedicated to my wife's family, her sister and the nieces. If you can't arrange the photos of your pets in album order, at least keep them together and try to arrange them chronologically. You can always return to them later and build an orderly display.

2. Plan on what to do with your pet's remains. Some towns, cities and other jurisdictions prohibit the burial of pets on your property. In the case of larger animals such as dogs and cats, arrangements can be made with most veterinarians to cremate your animal. Sometimes you will be given the ashes. I have heard of cases where it is not done, so check ahead or find a pet crematory that will return the ashes to you if that is your desire. Some areas have pet cemeteries where for a maintenance fee you can have your pet interred. In the case of small birds, remains disposal is less of a problem. A bird can be laid to rest in a small wooden or metal box, tightly wrapped with plastic and waterproof tape, and even kept in a closet until a decision is made about a final resting place. I know people who disposed of their caged bird's remain via the refuse bin. They did not have a bond with their birds, I can guarantee!

3. Think about whether or not you will get another pet. This is all I suggest: think about it. When the time comes, you may have solid reasons not to want a "replacement." Consider the possibilities anyway. If you have young children, a new pet will take the edge off their grief. It may also massage your sentiments about the loss. Loneliness is akin to hunger. When your stomach is empty, it signals you by feeling hungry. It is warning you to send food for sustenance. The empty feeling after a pet death is a signal from your system that something important is missing. You need to refill the void. Getting a new pet can do that.

4. Remind yourself and your family that pet lifespans are generally brief. Unless you own a young parrot or macaw, your pet will almost certainly not outlive you or other members of your family. Remind yourself, too.

Understand that nothing will halt the aging process, and the day will arrive. Disease, accident or whatever the cause, you will lose your pet. Be prepared.

There are some cautions to keep in mind. I have made a list of "don'ts" to help you with them:

"DON'T S" TO AVOID WHEN YOUR PET DIES

1. Don't hide your grief with alcohol! Alcohol is a depressant.
2. Don't talk constantly about your loss to others.
3. Don't be alone.

4. Don't resort to drugs to cover your grief.
5. Don't assume the blame.

1. The first "don't" is very important. If you drink to cover or forget your grief, the opposite will happen. You don't want to depress yourself any more than you have become. Getting drunk will only prolong the suffering. Come face-to-face with grief, sober and aware.

2. Talking about your loss or the grief you are experiencing with your friends and neighbors or co-workers will only chase them away. Few people want to listen to your misery. Your family will understand and in most cases be sympathetic ears, but keep it light.

3. Staying alone will not help you now. Seek friends to spend time with, and make it "normal" time. Don't discuss the loss or your feelings over and over again. Try to act your usual self.

4. Drugs will only be a short-term solution, like drinking. There are prescribed antidepressants that may help. If your grief is immediately overwhelming, sleep on it first, then consult your physician.

5. You will feel guilt about your pet's death. We will cover that later, but remember this: *It is not your fault.*

15. THE GOAL

There is a goal you must reach sometime after your beloved pet, or friend or family member passes away. It is the point at which your grief will pass, transferring itself into fond memory. Everyone who intends to put the sadness and sorrow behind must reach that point.

I first perceived my goal when I reached the realization that I had been born just for this! My goal was simple: *To reach the day when I could remember Beery with dry eyes and a smile.* That was it.

You must set your goal. It may be something like this: To reach the day when you can look at the pet's photograph, touch the place where the pet rested, or talk about the pet without feeling the emotions that came with its death. Or it may be to reach a point where everything gets back to "normal" and life goes on. The latter is a bit vague but may work for you. The objective is to set an end point where your grief is handled and doesn't cause emotional stress.

Write it down and stick your goal where you can read it frequently. Do this as soon as possible after your pet dies. I used a magnet to affix mine to a place in my studio office. It was there for almost a year, although I had reached my goal much earlier.

A tip: Save the paper with your goal written on it. Later, we'll explain why.

If you have a family, discuss the goal with them. Let them bring their ideas to the words you write. Children have a fine way of expressing things like this. Their input can be valuable. It will help them work through their grief, too.

When you reach your goal, and you will, you may not realize it at first. Unless you read it frequently, chances are you will pass the point without recognizing the change. That is good. It is a goal that will take time to achieve. You will get there.

There is a widely distributed tale called THE RAINBOW BRIDGE. It goes something like this: There is a wondrous and beautiful park land connected to heaven by a rainbow bridge. When a pet dies, it goes to this place and awaits its closest human companion. There, the animal has plenty to eat, is free of predators, and remains happy, healthy and playful until the human arrives. When the owner departs this life and arrives at that place, the pet finds the human soul and they are joyfully reunited. Then they cross the rainbow bridge to heaven together, never to be separated again!

I was sent this story on a sympathy card by my veterinarian's office shortly after Beery died. It filled me with comfort and I still have the card in my possession today.

V. The Empty Cage

16. THE SHRINE AND THE SCRAPBOOK

I made a list that will help you once the dreaded day of loss arrives. This list is an important one. It is exactly what I did plus a few added suggestions. It worked for me and I hope it will for anyone who chooses to follow what I did to alleviate my personal pain:

WHAT TO DO IMMEDIATELY WHEN YOUR PET DIES

1. Call a close friend who will listen and sympathize.
2. Build a shrine to your pet.
3. After a period of personal mourning, clean yourself up and go out to do something normal.
4. Remove the pet's bed or cage to a garage or storage room.
5. Stick to whatever routines you have established.

In the immediacy of the event, remembering these points may be difficult if not impossible. If you can, do them.

1. Call a close friend who will listen and sympathize. When Beery died I did the things I previously described, then I called my wife on her cell phone. She seemed to withdraw, and I could not count on her to sympathize or even listen to me for long. So I called a business colleague, Chris. He came over later that day and we sat out back and talked about Beery. He is a good listener. I did most of the talking through choking back tears. Chris understands, and that is why I called him. We spent several hours together that day.

Your friend should be a good listener. It should be a person who knew the pet, too. It would be good for you if someday you returned such a favor to someone you know who will lose a dear pet.

2. Build a shrine to your pet. This is a temporary item that will eventually dissolve into a simple framed photograph or a trinket or toy kept on a shelf. I began Beery's shrine when he laid in "state" on the towel in his cage. I placed a cut rose beside him, then went to a florist and bought a small vase of lilies. I put them on the corner of a dresser near him. I got out two or three good photos of him and put them in standing frames near the vase. Last, I set a Jahrzeit candle glass there and lit it.

Later that evening I put a towel in his cigar humidor coffin, laid him and the rose on it, placed his mirror beneath his head and tucked the towel over all that. I put a photo, a lock of my hair and a little handwritten note about our bird and us. Then I closed the box and moved all the mementos and the coffin to a cabinet surface in the living room. There I arranged it and added a few of his favorite things such as the piano music box and a thumb-operated wooden toy.

This was his shrine, and until the following day when I wrapped the humidor and buried him under the white rock, his candle burned without cessation.

After the burial, the flowers were gone, the toys, photos and music box remained in

situ. Over the next few weeks my wife banished those remaining items, one-by-one into the bedroom and my office. As this happened, I retrieved his empty cage from the garage and hung it from the ceiling hook where I worked in the back room. It hung there until the day I moved in June of 2004, and it is still with me today, albeit in this temporary residence.

The shrine is a tribute to how important the pet was in your existence. It is not an altar. It is a temporary focus for memories and a place to center your grief.

3. After a period of personal mourning, clean yourself up and go out to do something normal. Sometime in the afternoon, after I had arranged things and talked to Chris, I showered and finally dressed for the world. Then I locked up and drove to a neighborhood coffee shop where “cronies” gather and try to solve the world’s problems. I bought a mocha and sat with them for about an hour. I didn’t mention anything about Beery except to say that he had died that morning. My friends down there knew he had cancer and was failing. I thanked them for their kind words, but kept the discussion off the subject where I could. After that I drove to a large department store and shopped for essentials. Then I went to the driving range and hit about a bucket of golf balls.

When I returned home, I told my neighbors what had occurred. Then I tried to get dinner going for our expected guests.

You must get out among people. Even if you don’t know them, find a store or place where the world is acting “normally.” Listen to what others are saying. Watch what they are doing. The experience will remind you that life goes on.

4. Remove the pet’s bed or cage to a garage or storage room. I put Beery’s cage in the garage, from where I retrieved it in a few weeks. Pick up your pet’s toys, rugs, beds and other reminders as soon as you can. If you intend to save them, clean them and stash them somewhere out of your immediate sight. They can be sorry reminders of that day’s tragedy. Later, you may treasure some of them.

5. Stick to whatever routines you have established. I tried to prepare our evening dinner. It was simple, but I could not eat. If you have a family, do what you must to make the routine as normal as possible. Turn on the TV news. Water the lawn. Mow the grass. Do some laundry. Life must go on.

After the first few days or even weeks, you have more to accomplish in order to achieve your goal. A good start is to get out the photos of your pet and put together a scrapbook. Begin by selecting your favorite pictures. Then visit a scrapbook shop, or an art supply store and look for an attractive but suitable book to become the memorial. There are several good web sites that can help you create your book. Go to a search engine and type in “scrapbooks” and “memorial photo albums.” If you are creative, the scrapbook can become an intense, absorbing project. If not, It will be fun and full of memories. Don’t forget to put the scrap of paper on which you wrote your goal into the scrapbook!

Memories are painful immediately after a death. The object of creating a scrapbook is to deal with those recollections in a constructive way. You can involve your family in the project. It will help everyone deal with the tragedy

Dealing is a key word. You cannot pass grief off onto someone or something else. It is yours, it is internal and you must overcome it.

One common response to a pet’s passing is the emotion of guilt. Many times I asked myself if there was anything I could have done to prevent Beery’s death. Could I have extended his short life? Had I followed all the correct paths of animal husbandry? Had I protected his health as well as possible? *Was it my fault?*

Guilt will come at you. Go face-to-face with it and strip it of its validity. There probably

was nothing more you could have done to prevent the loss. Work through this battle thoroughly or it may haunt you forever. Consider everything you did for the pet and realize *it was not your fault!* If the emotion lingers, seek a counselor for help.

I read my horoscope one day and it said: *“The only thing you can ever give away is your power. You can always walk away from the table.”*

You can't give away grief. You must and will deal with it. Keeping it inside, or internalizing your grief, will only harm you. To relieve your pain you should do the things I have described and listed.

I went one step beyond my listed items. I decided to write this book. It is the final item on my personal journey to my goal. Now when I picture Beery I smile at the memories! Perhaps by putting all this down in words I can help someone out there who suffers from their loss, someone whose grief may be inconsolable. If that is the case, that's good. But the act of writing this has brought memories of my pets, of Sally, and of Beery back into focus. Recalling them has been good. I have not revisited the terrible grief I knew at the time by writing down these memories.

I reached my goal. I knew that this project would be difficult, but I promised to do it long ago. If I have made myself appear strange, that's O.K. A little bird told me I was goofy.

EPILOGUE

On June 24, 2004, a few days before I loaded the moving van, I carried a shovel to the back yard and moved the white rock and the black Buddha. I dug up Bebop and Beery's coffins and cleaned off the years of dirt. They had survived the elements so well the taped boxes looked as if I had put them there the day before!

I wrapped the two boxes tight in a plastic bag and put them in my car.

For weeks I had been moving containers by automobile a distance of about seventy-five miles. Along the way I discovered a suitable place for my buddies. It was at the end of a long and winding trail near the top of a rocky peak. I had already been up there twice, and had driven most of the off-road trail in my Toyota with no bottom damage. After putting the shovel in the trunk, I drove the long way to the spot one more time.

When I returned that evening, I refilled the back yard holes, tamped down the soil and arranged everything as it had been before. Later that week, Buddha moved with me. There also is a flat stone with BEBOP etched into the surface. It is here, too. The empty cage with the tiny green bell is still my shrine to Beery.

Whenever I take the highway past the mountain, I look up and realize they are as close to heaven as little angels can get, just this side of the rainbow bridge.



BeBop



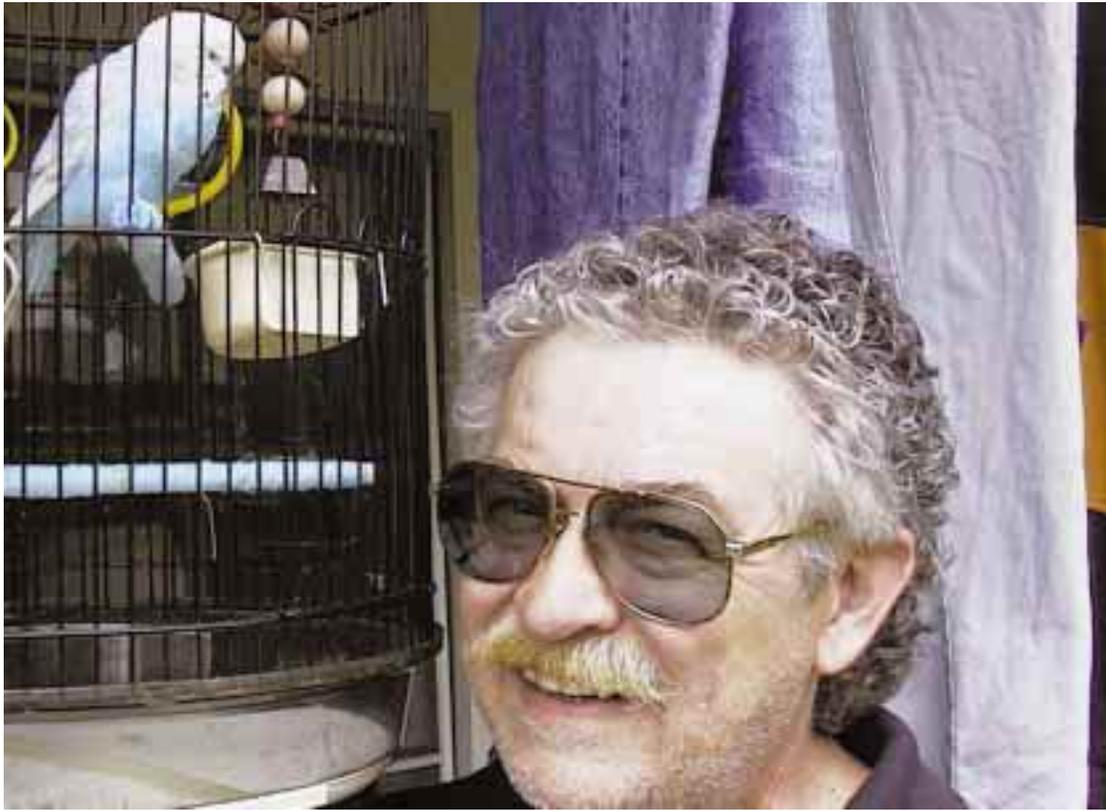
Sally Carmen



Beery about to grab his little green bell.



Beery ringing his bell with his right talon.



Forever Buddies!