

Beyond Disposition

*Reframing
Pet Loss Through
Compassion
& Care*

BY GABRIEL NGO

“STOIC” AND “NEVER TOO HIGH, NEVER TOO LOW” are words and phrases that those who know me closely have often and consistently used to describe me. I am the youngest of four with a 20-year age gap between myself and my three older siblings. My mother was number 15 out of 16 kids and my father was the middle child among five brothers. And having both sets of grandparents born in the 1880s, I have been around death practically all my life.

But as a grown human being, I have to say that the most difficult decision(s) that I’ve had to make is deciding when to have any of my dogs put down (multiple times in the past). Then my pit bull-corgi mix rescue of 10 years, Stitch, took a severe downturn within 36 hours, was diagnosed with cancer on a Sunday morning, then died in my arms that night before I could take him to our regular vet to be euthanized on Monday morning. I’m still not sure I ever got over that one; I suppose I just pushed through it.

For someone like me—who does not have human children, my dogs are like my kids ... and I suspect that pets in general (dogs, cats, rabbits, potbelly pigs, you name it) are like family members to many of the general population. What makes it more difficult (for me at least) is that animal family members can’t talk—they can’t tell you what hurts, how they’re feeling, or anything that might be wrong with them. I mean, they can’t necessarily look back at me and say, “I’m ready” or “I’m at peace.” So, when I am trying to decide between a balancing of how long to hold on for hope of a turnaround or relinquishing any remaining selfishness of having them hold on because I don’t want to lose them, this is what makes it so difficult.

The Evolution of Pet Care

I am fortunate that I can trust my vet and have been going to the same one since 1997. My vet has over the years

utilized **Angel Oaks Pet Cremation** in Houston. Angel Oaks has been in service for over 30 years as an independently owned business, with a clear emphasis on compassion and professionalism by elevating standards of care and strict tracking documentation.

One of their main selling points is that your pet never leaves their care, as cremations are performed by them and not shipped out to a trade pet crematory. Sound familiar? Angel Oaks also does in-home removals, working directly with pet families, in addition to the removals they perform for partnering vet clinics; and the turnaround time is about 48 hours. They offer private pet cremations, where your pet is returned to you in a wood-box urn with your pet’s name etched into a metal plate on the front and “communal” pet cremations, where your pet is not returned to you and scattered accordingly.

Angel Oaks (from what I can gather) began as a “typical” vet-channel anchored operator but has since evolved over the years into providing in-home and in-facility euthanasia as well. Most pet deathcare or afterlife service businesses begin the way Angel Oaks did—as a pet crematory. However, many of these businesses remain simply as pet crematories running the same/similar vet clinic-channel anchored business model.

What Angel Oaks has evolved into, by providing in-home/in-facility euthanasia, is akin to what we normally



**“The bond
with a dog
is as lasting
as the ties of
this earth can
ever be.”**

—Konrad Lorenz,
Austrian zoologist,
ethologist, & 1973 Nobel
Laureate in physiology

associate as being your traditional, brick and mortar, full-service funeral home.

To illustrate this evolution further, there is an independent, fantastic “full-service” pet deathcare business in Pennsylvania called **Peaceful Pet Passage**. Peaceful Pet Passage does not operate on the vet-channel model. Rather, it operates on a direct-to-consumer model, where pet families make contact directly. Peaceful Pet offers in-home/in-facility euthanasia as well as private and communal (which is called “memorial”) pet cremations.

But here is where Peaceful Pet Passage “ups the ante.” these folks use video to identify every pet that is being cremated, regardless of whether the cremation is private or communal. How’s that for transparency and utmost assurance? They don’t just tell you that your pet has been properly tracked throughout the cremation process ... they show you.

Privately cremated pets are returned to their families in a cherry urn, with the pet’s name engraved on a bronze plate in the front as well as tufts of the pet’s fur carefully wrapped inside (and a paw print if the family so chooses). In addition, Peaceful Pet provides a memory stick containing the video identification with returned pet remains, and pet families opting for communal/memorial cremation for their pets may access the video of their pet’s cremation for one year by visiting the facilities (after one year, the pet cremation video ID is still accessible but is then catalogued onto Peaceful Pet’s hard drive).

Also, rather than scattering communal cremations, Peaceful Pet offers to maintain the pet remains until a shared, burial cylinder is full. The remains are then buried on the 26-acre grounds with a corresponding name tag on the memorial wall. Pet families are assured that their fur-baby/pet family member are never “stacked” either on top of or below any other pet during removals.

As for funeral home businesses that have taken a very forward-thinking approach, **Messinger** in the greater Phoenix/Scottsdale area began integrating pet deathcare/aftercare into its core service model in 2015 via the Entrusted Pets by Messinger brand. And while Messinger partners with mobile vets and only facilitates in-home euthanasia—rather than having licensed vets on-staff like Peaceful Pet Passage or Angel Oaks—Messinger offers human-level care to pet families by offering private cremations, partitioned/semi-private cremations, and communal cremations for pets.

There are options for expedited pet cremations and witness ID cremations—as well as human-level, parity memorialization options. I had also heard that on occasion, Messinger will perform funeral services and gatherings for a pet on special request from a



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family (although I cannot confirm this to be wholly true or not).

Incorporating Pet Care into Your Business Model

So, what is the point to all of this, and why am I dedicating an article to it? I shall enumerate the points in summary for you in hopes of illuminating your knowledge and challenging your thinking a bit:

Pet loss and grief are real. With less of the general population having kids and more of this population having pets (often multiple pets), pets are now generally accepted as family members—rather than “just a” dog or cat that someone owns. And with a growing population of folks “just like me,” pet deathcare/after life providers have stepped-up through their service offerings. One last example would be **Lap of Love**, an in-home pet euthanasia primary business network (that also greatly emphasizes consulting and grief counseling) that was started by two vets and is now privately backed.

There are direct parallels to the pet deathcare/after life business and our own human, funeral service business—from where the business model began to where it has evolved today. Most pet businesses begin as a pet cremation business, and

most of those businesses currently remain as simple pet cremation businesses. These pet crematories generally operate on vet clinic-dependent channels to drive volume. There are others that have either evolved or originated in concept and practice as high-value service pet deathcare businesses.

Pets (and animals in general) have shorter life spans than we do. A wise person once shared: “people don’t care about how much you know until they know how much you care.” Taken together with the fact that the pet death rate is not tied to the flu season or winter months, what better way for you to show the community how much you care by serving their pet loss with dignity, compassion, and care? Rather than telling a family how you would take care of their loved one, you can take the opportunity to demonstrate this with their beloved fur-baby before you get the opportunity to care for their mom or dad.

However, if you choose to enter the pet deathcare/after life “arena,” you better commit to doing it right, as there are no “half-sies” if you go down this path. There are current pet operators who are already doing right and doing it better than the rest, and if there is not a true commitment on the same or similar level, the negative exposure will come quickly. **M**

Gabriel Ngo is director, Transaction & Advisory Services, Foresight.