

Contemplate this thought for a minute: the majority of us have, at some point in our lives, experienced the loss of a pet. Be it our own or a family animal, were your feelings associated with their deaths on a par with the loss of a human?

Sure, the answer for many is resounding. The experience is as equally painful as losing a relative- for some, maybe even more so. Yet, if our regards for these family extensions are so high, why don't we treat their parting on parallel heights with traditional funerals?

The answer to this may lie in our own psychologies, argues Sophie Parker, of Pet Plan. "Death, for many people", she says, "produces an almost immediate fear factor. It shatters us emotionally; we lose much of our communication. When we do that, we shut down physically".

The opportunity and challenge to funeral directors, then, is to find a way of assisting the public with the mourning stage on a profitable but individually tailored basis. Whether a simple burial, cremation, or a more flamboyant service, any service should seek to assist the public with coming to terms with their loss. As the American poet, Amelia Burr, wrote: "because I have loved life, I shall have no sorrow to die".

Those who followed our recent series concerning Religious funerals will reflect upon a seemingly universal view amongst its followers that death is but one element of life itself that for all living things. Moreover, that death should be a celebration of life itself. That said, there's a disagreement on just how far any celebrations would, perhaps even should, go. Islam, for example is regarded by some scholars as holding an anthropocentric view of death. Humans head a hierarchical structure above all creations. At the same time, Hindus do not consume meat, viewing any killing whatsoever as unlawful. Amongst the trade itself, pet cemeteries are in a reasonably wide existence, yet more tailored pet funeral services are in startlingly short supply.

Similarly, environmental issues are an increasing concern. As last month's feature concerning the moral dilemmas of cremations explored, emissions and long-term impacts to the planet have never been so forefront in our minds. Mark Johnston of the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, echoes this. Pointing to significant changes in the last decade, Johnston believes that "people move more frequently and don't like to leave their pet's grave behind when they move. A small percentage of owners nowadays like a small memorial service for their pet, as it helps with the grieving process. For these reasons, I see an increase in individual cremation and pet cemeteries". With this in mind, the evidence is there to the funeral profession that a change from the days of a simple home burial for our pets is in demand

Historically, the high regard that we place upon creatures is believed to originate in early Egyptian history. The British Museum, the home to a vast array of Ancient Egyptian artefacts and relics, including some of those of Tutankhamun) note that cats, strongly associated with royalty, were "held in the highest respect". So much so that they frequently appear in Book of the Dead papyrus vignettes cutting up the evil serpent Apophis. Whilst domestication has seen an increase in the breeds and scope available to

owners, one thing has remained almost static. Pets aren't so much guardians to their owners. For many, they are a soul-mate- a bond above all human levels.

And so in death, there remains a great affection between owner and pet. Greyfriars Bobby, a dog owned by Edinburgh City Police night watchman John Gray in the 19th Century. After Gray's death from tuberculosis at an early age, Bobby guarded his owner's grave compassionately for fourteen years until passing away in 1872. Five years before the dog's death, it was pointed out that an ownerless dog, by law, should be destroyed. Such was the love for Bobby, however, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh (also, interestingly, a Director of the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) paid a renewal of the dog's license. Thus, the dog became the responsibility of the City Council, and now rests close to his owner's grave, in close proximity to Greyfriars Kirkyard.

With our life expectancies significantly higher this side of the millennium, pets are on the whole outlived by their owners. Consequentially, we naturally look to make the most of the time we have with them as possible. The increasing expenses of food and veterinary bills, combined with the stresses of maintaining high-maintenance breeds (particularly pedigree and exotic), has seen a colossal increase in the demand for Insurance. Research from leading data analyst firm Mintel indicates that "the pet health insurance market in the U.K. is worth more than £245 million. There are currently over 1.85 million pet health insurance policies in place, and approximately 50 pet health insurance providers in the country".

Having started in 1976, Pet Plan is one of the earliest established Pet Insurers in the UK. A giant in the market, its market share is more than forty three percent. Nevertheless, Sophie Parker sees opportunities for all. "It's not so much a lucrative business, as a need that firms like Direct Line and More Than have branched into". When I put to her the possibility of the funeral trade equally diversifying into pet funeral services, she is somewhat less certain. "There is a definite justification", she remarks. "Pet insurance is, by its own right, an emotive service. We want the best for our family, and that includes our pets. Owners want to be properly equipped, and that goes for their deaths too".

If death is an emotive subject then, is it fair to say that for Funeral Directors, there is a feeling that many find discussing the death of a pet a taboo? Not so, as Johnston continues. "A small percentage of people are not prepared to talk about the death of their pet. The majority of people will discuss it though., and we encourage it if the pet is terminally ill to remove some of the fears. We can, unlike doctors, make the end painless".

Just as the funeral profession no doubt aims to provide customers with happy, uplifting services, enabling the public to remember in their own ways, so pet funeral services have seen a demand. All be it, as "a pure accident that we hadn't really contemplated", Philip Dean, of Heavenly Stars Fireworks tells me.

The company officially launched around December 2007, and “exists predominantly for the human cremated remains sector”, Dean admits. Thousands of hits of their website (www.heavenlystarsfireworks.com), emails and calls to their Essex-based office later, the firm is now evaluating marketing leaflets and a separate location and business process in a similar style of business exclusively for the pet market.

Specialising in two cremated remains products called ‘Eternal Stardust’ and ‘Celebration of Life’ (priced at £249.99 inc. vat), which Deans says “deal tastefully with the dispersal of cremated remains by firework” these, he look to provide “an affordable figure”, allowing pet owners “to say goodbye in a fitting manner for what, in many cases have been lifelong or ten-year plus pets- worthy companions and friends”. Owners are sent a container for the remains, which is returned to the company. From there, a specialist embedding process embeds the ashes within the fireworks. These are later returned to the recipient, with a certificate of authenticity.

Both services are engineered to disperse around 200 grams of cremated remains for between ninety seconds to two minutes, dependant upon the model chosen. As Dean eloquently puts it, the decision is the client’s- either for a “quiet, gentle display”, or “the loudest bangs you’ll ever hear in your life”.

He acknowledges that times are “very early in the pet-cremated-ashes-by-firework profession” adding, “as this sector evolves, we fully expect to develop a wider range of products that will reflect the variation in shapes and sizes of pets”. Already, requests are being made from horse owners to hamster owners. “We can take any size animal”, Dean says proudly. “Our services will not be limited. The beauty is that if there’s not enough cremated remains, we can add a chemical structure close to that of the ash itself”.

With only two competitors in the fireworks market, providing services “more towards the thousands of pounds bracket”, Dean claims, Heavenly Stars Fireworks have seen the light that seems to shining so brightly upon them. “It’s about providing consumer choice”, he concludes. “one of the potential benefits of our service is helping families with children who suffer a pet death come to terms with a more positive celebration of the life of the pet rather than mourning its death. This approach to the celebrating of life may become a useful life-skill when having to deal with the death of those we love”.

Whilst the traditionalists may argue that the pet market holds a fine line, which few seemed to have crossed, others argue that these services provide an upbeat alternative. Whatever the line, there is no denying that the opportunity is there, and for some- quite literally- is taking off.