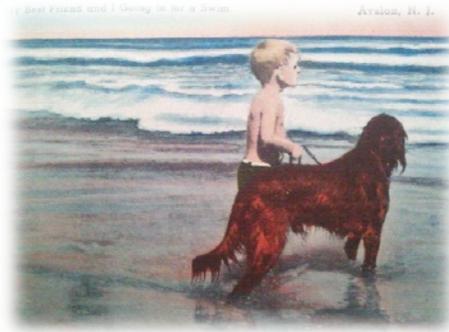


ON GRIEVING A COMPANION DOG

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A family member of one of our church members recently experienced the loss of their dog which got me to thinking that one of the greatest joys of my life has been the pleasure of the company of an Irish Setter or two. I first fell in love with the breed while a child, when I met my first Irish Setter, whose name was Holly. She was a beauty to behold with great rich mahogany color. Her attitude was friendly and engaging to strangers like me. Holly was full of energy and life. It was therefore easy to be smitten by her and her breed. Later in childhood I read about an Irish Setter in Jim Kjelgaard's book which was later made into the Disney movie, "Big Red". Like the young boy, Danny, who upon laying his eyes on Red determines that no other dog will do to walk by his side, I promised myself that one day I would have an Irish Setter for my own. Little did I realize then that one never owns an Irish Setter – it is they that have a claim on you.

Over the years Irish Setters have been a blessing to me and those fortunate enough to enter into my experience. As a parish minister my setters travelled to my office and greeted all visitors. Children rushed into church on Sunday mornings and headed not for Sunday School classrooms or into the sanctuary but into my office to see the setter(s) in residence. Little hands offered dog biscuits and gentle licks were given in reward for the kindness of the children and their thoughtful parents. I remember a particular setter, an old retired national champion named May who came from a very limited socialized experience beyond the home and the show ring. When I adopted her she was already a senior citizen who had not experienced real contact with adults beyond her breeders and handlers. With time in her experience at church May become not only accepting and comfortable but also engaging with the children and adults who showered her with real hospitality and understanding. She grew to become a significant member of the church.

In time May's age caught up with her proving true once again for me and for members of my congregation and neighbors that there is only one problem with Irish Setters – they do not live long enough. When May was struck with a terminal illness she still went to church and was lovingly cared for by the children and adults. When she passed there was a great sense of loss not only for me and my family but also in the community of the church where she had lived into a specialized ministry of relationship based upon acceptance and love. I still have the many cards from members and friends marking her death. I also still have the children's drawings and little notes that they made marking their relationship with May and their loss of their special friend.

Each of the deaths of my Irish Setters was significant to me and to others who mourned their passing. While each journey with them had been different, they all shared the commonality that the Irish Setter breed exudes – a fun-loving spirit and an affection which cannot be contained. The truth is my Irish Setters, past and present, are now and always will be buried deep in my heart. I know that in the grand scheme of things that life is richer because of the great bond which exists between humans and dogs of all types. This is a gift from above for which we can give thanks.



During my years of work in the humane movement I was often asked by curious and hurting people about mourning the loss of a companion animal. Speaking from my own experience and that of many who have shared their deepest pain over the loss of their companions I searched literature in the hopes of finding a source of assurance and comfort. Let me share two of these with you.

In terms of Christian theology and biblical witness of the divine connection that we share with our dogs, other companion animals and those in the wild, I hold to the truthfulness of the words of wisdom found in these scriptures: Psalms 24:1 "The earth is the LORD'S, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein."; (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21) "I decided that God is testing us, to show us that we are no better than animals. After all, the same fate awaits man and animals alike. One dies just like the other. They are the same kind of creature. A human being is no better off than an animal, because life has no meaning for either. They are both going to the same place -- the dust. They both came from it; they will both go back to it. How can anyone be sure that a man's spirit goes upward while an animal's spirit goes down into the ground?"; Revelation 5:13 "And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, hear I saying, "Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the lamb forever and ever."



Another source of comfort for those grieving the loss of a companion animal and considering the wonder of that relationship comes from Ben Hur Lampman writing in 1925. Lampman was a man like me who shared the same appreciation and joy of a setter who became firmly implanted in his heart.

Where to Bury a Dog

There are various places within which a dog may be buried. We are thinking now of a setter, whose coat was flame in the sunshine, and who, so far as we are aware, never entertained a mean or an unworthy thought. This setter is buried beneath a cherry tree, under four feet of garden loam, and at its proper season the cherry strews petals on the green lawn of his grave. Beneath a cherry tree, or an apple, or any flowering shrub of the garden, is an excellent place to bury a good dog. Beneath such trees, such shrubs, he slept in the drowsy summer, or gnawed at a flavorful bone, or lifted head to challenge some strange intruder. These are good places, in life or in death. Yet it is a small matter, and it touches sentiment more than anything else.

For if the dog be well remembered, if sometimes he leaps through your dreams actual as in life, eyes kindling, questing, asking, laughing, begging, it matters not at all where that dog sleeps at long and at last. On a hill where the wind is unrebuked and the trees are roaring, or beside a stream he knew in puppyhood, or somewhere in the flatness of a pasture land, where most exhilarating cattle graze. It is all one to the dog, and all one to you, and nothing is gained, and nothing lost -- if memory lives. But there is one best place to bury a dog. One place that is best of all.

If you bury him in this spot, the secret of which you must already have, he will come to you when you call -- come to you over the grim, dim frontiers of death, and down the well-remembered path, and to your side again. And though you call a dozen living dogs to heel they should not growl at him, nor resent his coming, for he is yours and he belongs there.

People may scoff at you, who see no lightest blade of grass bent by his footfall, who hear no whimper pitched too fine for mere audition, people who may never really have had a dog. Smile at them then, for you shall know something that is hidden from them, and which is well worth the knowing.

The one best place to bury a good dog is in the heart of his master.

