



How to Talk to Your Cat . . .

... is the title of a little book written a number of years back by Jean Craighead George. (She also wrote a similarly titled book about dogs, by the way.) The book really focuses more on how your cat 'talks' to you, but there are some good suggestions (like get down on your hands and knees when communicating with Kitty). I remember being charmed by the book when I first read it, and have recalled it over my years of having cats as companion animals.

But it came back to mind last evening in a rather sorrowful way. One of our two kitties died yesterday, having lost a battle with a car. (The driver stopped and called Animal Control who found her tag and called us -- so it wasn't an anonymous hit-and-run.) Angel (the deceased) and Mitch joined our family at the same time a number of months ago, with the help of the Dumb Friends League. While not siblings, they were great companions and playmates. And much of last evening, Mitch was on the prowl, searching for his friend. This morning, he was still looking. How do I tell Mitch that Angel is gone?

My two kids (7 and 12) have experienced pets' deaths, so they understand, but are, nonetheless, sad. Mom and Dad are trying to help with that, of course, as well as consoling each other. But words don't quite work with a tabby. And who knows if Mitch recognizes that the extra petting he's getting is a sharing of grief?

Death of almost any kind jolts us out of our day-to-day routine. Whether it is the massive tragedy of Haiti or the more immediate death of a family pet, we begin to ask very elemental questions. And we want to know that there is some meaning to it all. Most explanations fail, especially in the moment. In Judaism, the practice of "sitting *shiva*" recognizes this, as visitors to mourners are supposed to remain silent unless the mourner initiates conversation -- simply being present is understood as offering comfort at a difficult time. The desire for comfort and the desire to offer comfort are strong. Yet the mystery is great. And silence in the presence of a mystery is often the only appropriate response.

When I first read *How to Talk to Your Cat*, I remember thinking about it in terms of God. Recognizing the limits (and pitfalls) of anthropomorphizing the Divinity, I began to wonder how incomprehensible we are to That which greater than us. And likewise how incomprehensible the Divine is to us. If, as most of the world's religions affirm, God is compassionate, how is that compassion communicated to us in moments of grief and sorrow? And I can only conclude that it has to be done primarily through others, doing what little they can to make the pain a little more bearable.

So, I'll hug my wife and kids and sit with them and remember Angel's quirky personality. And I'll pet Mitch -- maybe a little more than usual. It's the least -- but probably the best -- that I can do given the situation. And that's okay. Maybe he'll understand.

Blessings,

Gary