A Part of the Family

The Pet Cemetery of Tucson

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I want to tell you about a unique pet cemetery in Tucson. I have to admit that the very idea of a pet cemetery is strange to me. When I was a boy, living in a small town in Southern Illinois, we would bury our pets in the empty field next to our house.

But I am not alone in this. I was in Saudi Arabia once, talking to an American who had lived there for several years. He said there were two aspects of American culture that the Saudis had trouble understanding. Parole for murderers and pet cemeteries.

Initially, I assumed that pet cemeteries were an American thing. After all, we have gourmet food deliveries for our dogs and cats, and even health insurance policies. And they live in the house. And often sleep with us. Sometimes at the expense of a spouse.

But in fact, the first pet cemetery was in London. In the 1800s as the rapid urbanization of England progressed, people began to take their pets with them to the city. One day, a grieving man went to the caretaker of Hyde Park and asked if he could bury his beloved Maltese terrier in the caretaker's garden. *Cherry*



had loved to romp in Hyde Park so the caretaker -- who knew her and her owner -- agreed. She was placed there with a simple stone: "Poor Cherry. Died April 28, 1881." Soon there were more requests, one from a member of the royal family. By 1903, when the garden had filled, there were 300 burials.



The first time I encountered the idea of humans and pets buried together was in the Doddington manor house in Lincolnshire. In the impressive living room, above the fire place, was a painting of a noble-looking dog.

And there was a story that went with that painting. The owner of that house, Henry Stone**,** and his dog were walking in the fields when a storm came up. They sat under the tree to hide from the rain. But soon the dog became agitated. It rushed away from the tree, barking. Then came back to Henry, still barking. Then away from the tree, then back. Always barking. Soon Henry joined the dog out in the rain. This was just before lightening destroyed the tree. The dog had saved its master. When the dog died, Henry wanted it buried in the local cemetery so he could be buried next to it, but the religious authorities said no. So he bought a piece of land touching the cemetery and buried the dog there. Inches over the line. Then he bought the



gravesite next to the dog for himself. Henry died in 1693 and today, the two – Henry and his dog – are spending eternity side-by-side.

Tucson Pet Cemetery

This brings me to the focus of this talk, the wonderful cemetery in Tucson. It is a beautiful cemetery surrounded by mountains.

There is a crematorium in the cemetery building, as well as a selection of elegant caskets.







The first thing about this cemetery that struck me – I might even say shocked me – was that there were people buried along with their pets. Henry Stone would not be surprised, but it surprised me. Sometimes it

was a husband and wife buried with their pet in the middle. In one case, two men who were companions were spending eternity with the third member of their family.





This sounds like the making of a children's book: "*Fido Has Two Daddies.*" Of Course, someone would probably object to the Board of Education.

Dotted around the cemetery are affirmations of eternal love and devotion. "If tears could build a stairway" is common, as is "We will miss you forever." One lament noted that "A million times I needed you, a million times I cried."

But one thing is universal, even in a pet cemetery There is the reality of the rich and the poor. This cemetery definitely has a high-rent district, suburbs, and some slums.







Religious Issues

Dotted about are several statues of Saint Francis of Assisi, who lived in the 1200s. He is the Patron Saint of animals. He was said to be so gentle that birds would perch on his shoulder and wolves would sit at his feet.



Pope Francis honored him by taking his name. For those who visit Catholic Cemeteries, his statue is familiar. Of course, St. Francis is not the only person surrounded by animals. Bernie Sanders and Pope Francis also have a connection with birds.





But this raises two questions: The first is whether pets have religion. Professor Grant Wacker and his wife Katharine Wacker wrote a fascinating book on letters children sent to Billy Graham. One child wrote with some excitement to tell Billy that his dog "had just turned Christian." It is not clear what evidence that lad had of his dog's recent affirmation of faith, but he was very happy at this development. And perhaps evidence is a minor factor where faith is the question.



In this cemetery there are frequent symbols of religion. There are crosses and Stars of David. One marker had menorah candles on it, another a statement of faith embraced by Christians. One had

Christ on the cross, another a dog with Jewish and universal dates. One wonders if the dog or cat would be able to truly understand what they were embracing. But the owners were hoping for the best. And we might also ask that question of humans. How much do they really understand?





And for those who are curious, there is not a single Muslim teaching that suggests animals go to heaven. But on the positive side, there is a legend that Mohammed had a cat named *Muezza,* which means comfort. This story is not considered authentic by religious authorities, but it is consistent with the fact that Mohammed often spoke of the obligation to be kind to animals.



On the related question of whether animals go to heaven -- Pope Paul VI appeared to answer this question when he assured Catholics that "One day we will see our animals again in the eternity of Christ." Alas, the

Vatican quickly issued a statement that the pope had been misunderstood (or was it misquoted?) and that the Church did not teach any such thing. And with the stroke of that doctrinal pen, millions of pets disappeared from heaven.

But for Protestants, at least those who admired Billy Graham, the answer is reassuring. Billy once received a letter from a woman whose husband had died. She missed him terribly but her dog gave her comfort. Then the dog died. She was sure that she and her husband would end up together in The Good Place but was distraught at the thought that she would never see her dog again. She asked Billy if she would see her dog in heaven. Billy was unequivocal: "Heaven will be a place of perfect happiness—and if we need animals around us to make our happiness complete, we can be sure God will have them there."

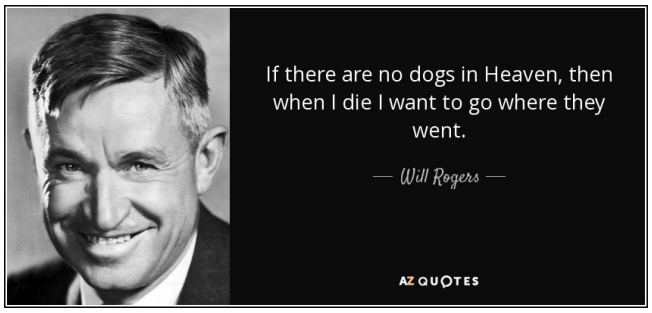


Not to be cynical but one wonders why being in the presence of God would not be sufficient happiness, even without a dog. But that is above my pay grade. (And above Billy's, to be honest).

Fortunately, we also have some data to fill in the blanks. Rasha Aridi, summarized the research of Eric Tourigny who studied 1,169 markers in four British pet cemeteries. (This was the *Smithsonian Magazine*, October, 28, 2020). Before 1910 only 1% made reference to religion. After World War II until 1990 (when the cemeteries were full and the project ended), 20% did. I am not sure what this tells us, that pets are becoming more religious over time or that the trauma of war made people cling to any hope they could find, or perhaps that owners are more aggressively converting their pets. Or maybe dogs and cats are

being upgraded from pet heaven, which was where I was told they would go when I was a boy. But we may never know. As the famous theologian Hans Kung said, "God does not act to satisfy human curiosity."

Veering away from theological speculation Will Rogers, definitely not a religious leader, took the agnostic position: As he put it, "Wherever they go, I want to be with the dogs." And one marker suggests that with that wish he will end up in the Good Place.





In Tucson, the answer appears to be yes, pets go to heaven



And just to reassure us, there are several rainbow bridges to help with the cross-over. In some cases, owners promised to meet their pets on the other side.

Of course, I guess if you are really serious about dogs and cats having souls, then all lives matter, even pet lives. This includes those still-born or experiencing a very early death (even before their eyes were open).



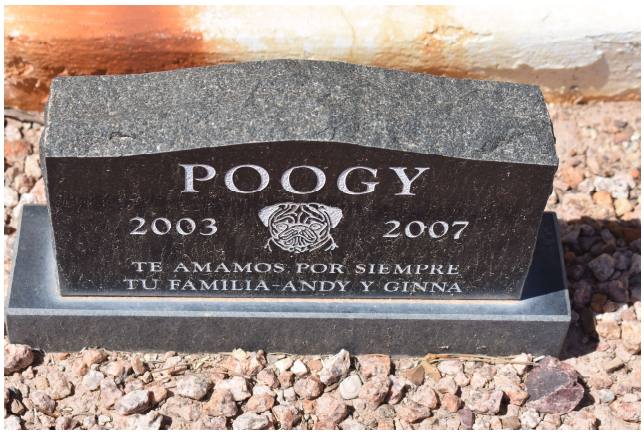
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different issue, it occurred to me that pet names might tell us something. Any such list would include the names we might expect, as well as some idiosyncratic ones. In Tucson, there were Taco, Spooky, HellavaDog, Samuel P. Von Woodpile, Tolstoy, Ratatouli, Snowball, and Macho, as well as one ever-faithful marine, a "Semper Fido."



But I got curious about these names. I wanted to see if the names in this cemetery corresponded to national naming pattern. I went to the internet and found the most common names for dogs and cats. Of the



top ten dog names, for males and females, and of the top ten cat names, for males and females, forty names in total, I found only two names that overlap with names found here. Jasper and Bella. I am not sure what this means. Do Tucson people have a different naming culture? Or are Tucson people name-normative and the rest of the country is off center?

And of course, in Tucson, 90 minutes from the Mexican border, some dogs speak Spanish. And one of them – *Poogy*—is loved forever.

Speaking of names, there were a cluster of names that caught my attention. A women from Tucson (Carla Donau) decided to create a home for Alaskan sled dogs no longer able to work. There is a section of the cemetery dedicated to her. In fact, she is buried here with them. All of the names of those dogs were Alaska names. *Denali, Nanook, Glacier, Yukon*. Sad to say, because of a recent Presidential Executive Order, Denali will have to be renamed McKinley.



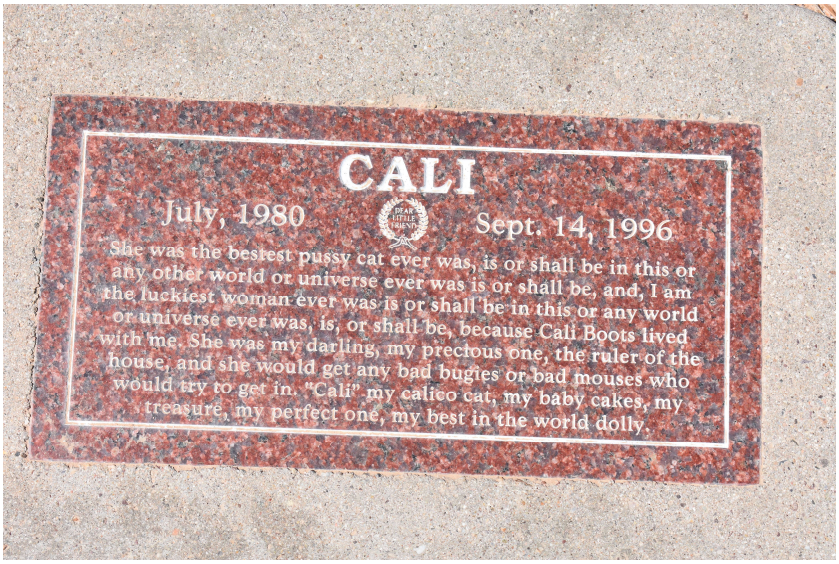




Some



pets got lengthy tributes**.** One got my attention. It is for *Cali,* who lived to 16.



"She was the bestest pussy cat ever was, is or shall be in this or any other world or universe ever was, is, or shall be, and I am the luckiest woman ever was is or shall be in this or any other world or universe ever was, is, or shall be because Cali Boots lived with me. She was my darling, my precious one, the ruler of the house, and she would get any bad bugies, or bad mouses who would try to get in. "Cali" my calico cat, my baby cakes, my treasure, my perfect one, my best in the world dolly."

Back to the sled dogs. They are not the only endangered pets. One poignant stone pays tribute to a dog rescued from a bad situation. . Let me read the text:



"*Eliot, a good and innocent dog, who knew only the worst of mankind until his final days, when at last he came to know our tenderness, compassion and love. May we be inspired as people to dedicate ourselves to bringing only the very best side of our humanity to all these fellow creatures who share this earth with us."*

This passage reminded me of the woman in our condominium complex is Tucson where Jane and I spend the winter. She adopted a grievously abused animal that had

been put into fighting rings in Mexico. It is a small dog that had been blinded and traumatized by its experience. She takes it walking every day. When we first me it, it would tremble when it realized there were strangers present. Now, two years later, it wags its tail when it hears us coming. We have to thank those people who take in such abused creatures. I am not sure if those dogs are going to heaven, but to find a kind owner who will feed you and pet you is close enough.

And lest we think that only dogs and cats are buried here, Noah would be very happy to see the variety of animals. There were donkeys, horses, rats, squirrels, rabbits, fish, hamsters and pigs. There was even a simian and the Sacred Cat of Burma. More about those in a minute.

Two Special Pet Stories

Several individual pets got my attention. Two were *Sam I Am* and *Wilbur***,** both famous literary characters. *Sam I Am* does not like green eggs and ham. Which is good for *Wilbur,* who is a pig and might well have been Sam's breakfast. Wilbur was born the runt of his liter and not destined for greatness, but he was rescued by a little girl who took care of him. Soon he met Charlotte, the spider, who gave him confidence. In time he entered a contest in the county fair and won an award as "Some Pig."

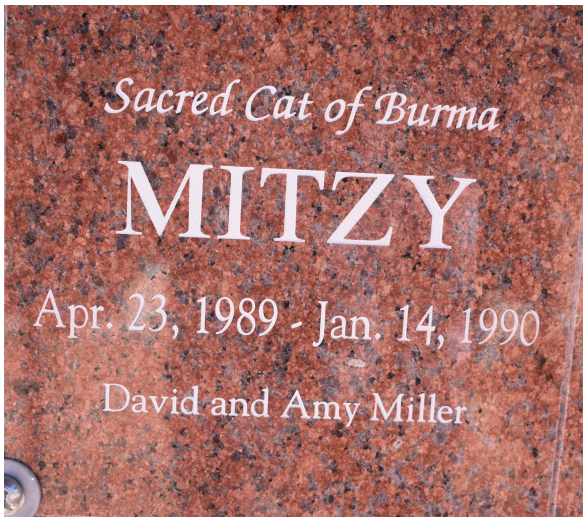




There were two pets that had short but meaningful lives – Bugs Bunny and the Sacred Cat of Burma. I am guessing that Bugs was the favorite pet of a young girl who loved him and whose tears would only abate when he was given an honorable burial. I can identify with that. As a little boy of 7 I was given a bunny by my grandparents for Easter. An Easter Bunny, I guess. I was also given a cardboard box where it could sleep and a head of lettuce. My bunny loved the lettuce so I kept feeding it all it wanted. The more I gave it – leaf after leaf after leaf – the more it snuggled me and wiggled its cute little nose. Unfortunately, my bunny needed some tough love because when I woke up the next morning and rushed to greet it, it had gone for its reward. Apparently it had died from an overdose of lettuce, which is an unusual cause of death. My heart was broken and I would definitely have wanted a grave for my bunny, but we did not do such thing back in those days.



The Sacred Cat of Burma was a total mystery to me, until I checked on the internet. It is a recognized breed in France, officially acknowledged in 1925. They call it Birman, which means Burma in French. It is from the monasteries in northern Burma but how did it get to France? One story is that two cats were a gift to a brave Frenchman who saved a monastery from its enemies. The other



story is that an unscrupulous Frenchman had stolen two cats and brought them to France. I wish the first story were true but having observed human nature for many decades I am inclined to believe the second one.

Anyway, the breed was nearly wiped out during World War II. I am not sure why but only two survived and they had to be cross bred with Persians and Siamese to perpetuate the breed, then reverse bred to restore their purity. They have long hair, with a color-pointed silky coat, deep blue eyes, and contrasting white gloves It is not clear how this particular Burmese-French cat got to Tucson.

Moving on, there is a "*beloved simian*." When I first saw this marker, I thought of a chimp who had lived with a family. Not like Caesar, the great ape, who suddenly realized he was a pet, not a member of the family, and, like Moses or Nat Turner, led an uprising. Buddy was surely a peace-loving chimp who was happy staying home with a banana when the family went out to dinner.



But then I saw that fascinating name. Godbeher. When I visit a graveyard, I always look for unusual names. This was one I had never seen before. It sounds like one of those odd Saxon Names left behind in England by invaders long ago. I have an ancestor named Theobold so I know the pattern. Theobold means either Bold For God or Fierce Combatant. I prefer the first version of my family history. *God Be Here* appears to be the origin of this name. It is a rare name. Whether as rare as the Sacred Cat of Burma is not clear.

Another name got my attention – *Abu Olguin.* I love the idea of a cat interested in science, but I was especially interested in its name. Abu obviously suggests an Arab Origin -- The father of Olguin. But as I searched for the origin of that name I did not find a consensus. One source said it was of Middle East origin. Another said it was Russian Jewish, from Olga. [A Russian Jewish person in the audience later disabused me of that possibility, saying that no Russian Jew would ever have the name of the ruler who converted people to Christianity).



Yet another source said it was Basque, meaning either one who tends olive trees or wolf, that is, brave. Today the name is most common in Mexico. And given that a noted soccer player has that name, I suspect the Spanish may own it. But then Abu Olguin received the Priestly Blessing from the book of *Numbers.*

May God bless you and keep you
May the Lord make his face
To shine upon you and
Be gracious to you.
May the Lord lift up his countenance
Upon you and give you peace.

I initially thought that was the Irish blessing but Jane corrected me. I checked the Bible and there it was. I asked how she knew the Priestly Blessing. She said she had sung it in choir.

Anyway, this cat is definitely not Irish Catholic. And even if Abu Olguin is not Jewish maybe his owners were. Or maybe he was a convert.

Reflections

In the end, I was left wondering about the boundary between humans and animals and how pets fit into that social unit we call the family. Are pets just animals that we love, or are they really family members? Why do some pets have religion? And why would anyone worry about whether their pet is going to heaven? And why would anyone possibly want to be buried next to their pet, or to worry about whether they will spend eternity together? Are these struggles a reflection of a distressed person, or a tribute to an animal life well lived? Or do humans really believe that some boundary has been erased? Will people soon be mixing their ashes with those of their cats and dogs? Are the people who bury their pets in a casket the same people who got upset that South Dakota Governor Kristy Noem shot her rebellious and dangerous dog?

Sorry. I don't have any answers.

Acknowledgement: I have to thank my research partner Jane Stockton for her invaluable contributions.



Supplementary Section on Detroit

The Detroit area has two pet cemeteries. One is a modest section in the corner of United Memorial Gardens. Once I took an eight-year-old girl there. She thought it was the most fascinating place she had ever seen. Afterwards she held her grandmother hostage and told her about all the animals. The other is the remarkable War Dog Cemetery. It is filled with dogs from Vietnam and Afghanistan and Iraq, but also from earlier wars. It also has police dogs, often with warm tributes by the officers who partnered with them. And Admiral Dewey's parrot is there. It lived to be 86 years old. I am sad to report that many war dogs, who fight side-by-side with American soldiers, and often save their lives, were put down as their wars ended. This was much to the distress of those who worked and fought with them.



