

How pets help when our hearts are breaking

By Suzanne Boles

Joey the cat (as I fondly call him) jumps up on my desk again. I am annoyed because he knows he shouldn't be there. He looks directly into my eyes. "I want your attention," they tell me. "Stop what you're doing! Focus on me, here, now, in this moment."



If I've learned anything about pets, there are two lessons that stand out. First, they exemplify "living in the moment," and, second, they can be salvation through grief. In 2013 we had two cats, Pouncer and Treble. In 2012 Treble became very sick. He had multiple issues including huge tumors in his belly. After the New Year, it became apparent he was suffering. My husband, Bob, and I took Treble to the vet. I held this loving, furry feline in my arms, wrapped in one of our daughter's old baby blankets. The vet told me she would put a small IV tube into his paw and inject it. Then, the vet said, Treble may shudder slightly before passing peacefully. Treble was whisked away and returned with his paw wrapped up. I whispered my goodbyes as the injection

was administered. I felt him sigh and he was gone. A few months later Bob became sick. After harrowing efforts to save his life he left this earth June 8, 2013, and I began a long and gut-wrenching grief journey. Later that year, Pouncer became ill. A friend insisted on coming with me as I repeated the ritual of saying goodbye to another beloved pet as he took his last breath wrapped in a warm blanket against my chest.

After I left the vet clinic I felt fine. But when I got home I fell on the floor and wailed from the depths of my soul. "What did I do that was so terrible that every living being that breathed the same air with me, every day, in my house, was taken from me?" I screamed and beat the ground with my fists until I had no more energy. Then I lay there sobbing. I couldn't deal with another loss. I didn't want any cats in my life again. But life without another living being is lonely enough. When you lose three, even if two are pets, in a short span of time, and you are literally left alone with nobody to care for or who cares for you, your home becomes a place of sadness and solitude.

Then, one day I woke up and, just like that, I was ready to bring a pet into my home. In fact, I wanted two cats again. I posted the call on Facebook and someone replied that they were given a stray cat but couldn't keep it. "Would you like to come see him?" she asked. I went and took my cat crate—*just in case*. He was a gray tabby, just like Pouncer and Treble, and, strangely, was named Bob. I took him home and called him Joey.

Later, I applied to adopt another cat at an animal fostering organization. I clicked through one adorable photo after another on their website until I saw a picture of a small calico kitten. I decided to visit her at her foster home. I went with the crate and she came home with me. I named her Cassie.

Having two pets again caused a sudden shift in my life. When I left the house I could tell a living being that I was heading out but would "be home soon." And when I returned, their two little faces would greet me at the door. I was amazed at how much better I felt having these two furry characters around. My grief was actually less painful. I felt like I had a daily purpose in life. So being the curious journalist that I am, I started researching. In addition to finding studies that showed actual health benefits related to having pets, I [read that](#), "Having a pet requires a person to put aside his or her own needs and grievances and focus on that pet ... Having a pet gives you something to live for. And that furry distraction may be all someone needs to perk up." And, [according to Animal Planet](#), "Pets are a great way to beat the blues. Not only are they known to offer unconditional love, but they may also give their owners a sense of purpose, which can be crucial for those feeling down in the dumps. Pets also combat feelings of loneliness by providing companionship, which can boost your overall mood and even bring you feelings of joy and happiness."

I realize now that Joey and Cassie were part of the "new normal" life I was told about right after Bob died. I had railed against it, but it came to me when the time was right. And the cats came when I was ready. They filled some of the emptiness in my home and in my heart. As Joey looks at me, perched on my desk, knowing fully well he shouldn't be sitting there, he defies me to keep doing what I'm doing instead of being mindful of him. At that moment I realize I am OK now. Pets do have a healing power and I am forever grateful they have come into my life.