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IN MEMORY OF LILY

Pastor Stephen Schutz

I'll never forget the day when I heard that she was dead. It was one of those sudden, tragic deaths where there is no warning. I was about to be in a whole world of pain. And I had this deep sense that my life was about to change forever.

The pain of losing a loved one is never easy. When it's sudden it seems extra hard to deal with. At some point, people will often say "it's time to get over it and move on." But why should we have to get over those who mean so much to us? I'm Richard Fox from Messages of Hope. This week my guest is Stephen Schultz. As a pastor, he's comforted a lot of people in their grief. But the experience he's about to share with you took him by complete surprise!

It will always be one of those days that will remain ingrained in my memory. I was driving home from work in peak hour traffic. I was speaking to my wife on the phone, who was already home and getting tea ready. Without warning our conversation was interrupted. I could hear some sort of commotion, an anguished cry and the clatter of something dropping. Then the call cut out.

I was on the freeway and had no idea what had just happened. I tried to call my wife back a number of times in quick succession but got nothing. I then tried my 20 year old son, whose voice I thought I had heard when the call got cut off, but couldn't reach him either. Finally I tried my 18 year old and still nothing.

I kept trying them all in turn as I willed the traffic to move faster and as I weaved my way through it as best I could. I was freaking out! Eventually my wife called back and she told me I had to pull over. I kept asking her what was wrong, but she refused to tell me anything until I had pulled over. I knew something was very, very wrong, but I had no idea what. Something must have happened to one of the children and I had this deep sense of impending dread, that my life was about to change forever.

I managed to get off at an exit and said 'tell me. Tell me what's happened'. She sobbed and could barely get it out as she said: "It's Lily. Lily is dead". It was so not what I was expecting and my first reaction was one of relief. My wife was okay. My boys were okay. But my dog was dead.

My dear dog, Lily, our 7 year old Golden retriever was dead. My younger son had been walking her. She had spotted a cat and chased after it onto a road and into the path of an oncoming car. The driver didn't stop, leaving my son on his own to deal with it. I got home as quickly as I could. I couldn't think of Lily yet. My first thought was for my son. I found him and hugged him, checking that he was okay, telling him it would be okay. Only now my thoughts turned to Lily. Where was she? She wasn't home. Was she still beside the road? I had to find her. I had to do something.

I was about to get in the car again when another car arrived, along with my older son. Some people had stopped to help and they had Lily in the back of their car. I gently lifted her out and the grief hit me hard. Now that I was holding her lifeless body the initial feeling of relief was gone. I lowered her to the ground and knelt beside her. I couldn't engage with the kind people who had helped. I wanted to, but all I could do was offer a choked, 'thank you', before they left.

I carried Lily out back and straight away started looking for a place to bury her. It wasn't rational. I knew that. But I couldn't stop myself. I had to find a place – the right place. She wasn't just a dog to me. She was family. She was my friend.

I finally found a place and started digging. It was tough work. I paused and fetched my younger son and got him to help. I needed it and I knew he needed it. My other son soon joined us. We worked together to get the job done.

We lay dear Lily in her grave and covered her over. I hated putting that dirt on her. It was like admitting I had failed her. We gathered as a family, said some words and a prayer – not my finest work as a pastor, I'll admit. Barely a few hours had passed since that call, but it felt like much more than that.

As a pastor I am no stranger to grief, just not my own. I liked to think I could empathise with others in their grief, to understand what they were going through. But I had no real idea. The grief I experienced at the death of Lily completely blindsided me. All my grandparents have died and other family members and friends but this loss seemed to be even more...personal.

Lily had been part of my daily life. The routine on my day off was to go for a long walk in the forest with her. This time was always healing to my soul as I watched her bound from one thing to another with the joy of life. The sense of losing this time and all the other experiences with her was breaking my heart.

Everything I knew about grief in theory was suddenly being played out for real in my thoughts and feelings. I had been able to keep grief at arms-length in the past and now it had reeled me in. I didn't feel I had the right to feel the sense of loss that I did; the right to grieve or allow others to see my grief. She was just a dog. I needed to get over it. Others go through much worse.

But I couldn't. I couldn't justify taking time off to grieve like you would with a human family member. I still functioned but it hurt. I felt I was betraying her memory by carrying on as normal. For those first days I went to her grave the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night. I re-visited the forest where we had spent those hours together. The first time I sobbed the whole time as I retraced our familiar path. I went back a second time to place a tennis ball at a favourite spot – I'm not even sure why I did that. I haven't been back since.

I was very guarded about who I shared my grief with. I didn't expect others to understand or care. I learnt through this that it doesn't matter if it is a pet or a friend or a partner – grief is grief. You can try and keep your distance but some day it will come up close and personal and you'll have to deal with it as best you can.

It has been 8 months since Lily's death. In that time I couldn't say I have fully dealt with my grief – but my grief has certainly been dealing with me. I knew enough before this happened to realise you don't get over the death of a loved one - you get used to it.

I won't get over Lily because I have made a conscious choice not to. Her memory is too precious for that. What we shared is too precious for that. Why should we have to get over those who mean so much to us? I won't do it and I don't reckon God wants us to either. The God I believe in values life, even the furry variety, and will see to it that life has the last word, not death.

Life has returned to a new normal, though in those early days I couldn't believe how it ever could. I still miss Lily terribly and I still wander down to her grave on occasion and shed a tear or two. This time has helped me to appreciate again that you can't take someone else's grief and they can't take yours. Grief is grief. But I've also learnt that God weeps with us in our grief.

We now have a new dog and the emotions of working through that is another story. We went for a golden retriever. We wanted a girl, but we got a boy – Charlie. He's not Lily and he doesn't have to be. He is part of our new normal, which includes tracking down missing shoes that he's carted off to the garden.

It's funny how none of us seem to mind. I think we all realise how much he has helped us with our grief. He has helped us to see that life can go on! And I reckon God would be happy with that.

For more about coping with grief go to messagesofhope.org.au. Or for a free booklet titled TAKE HEART IN YOUR GRIEF call 1800 353 350. God weeps with you in your grief, and his hands will hold you secure.

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