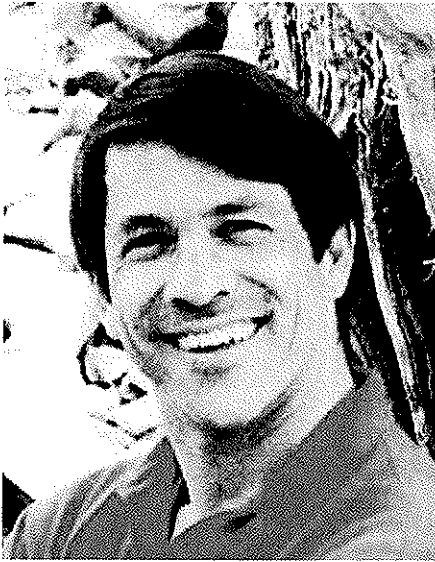


HIS VIEW: Pets, people and death with dignity

By William Brock

Posted on: Thursday, August 25, 2011



Brock

"She's gone," said the vet, lifting her stethoscope and raising her eyes. My wife and I were a mess - sobbing, and unable to hold back the emotion.

The vet was choked up as well.

Our faithful dog, Abby, supplier of ten thousand smiles, lay dead in her bed. And we had ordered her death.

It was a death with dignity, which is more than some humans are allowed.

That we had ordered Abby's death seems inconceivable because she was with us for every milestone in our family's history. My wife had her before she knew me, and as she liked to put it, "The dog was here first."

Sixteen years.

Abby was there when I proposed to my then-girlfriend. Before our kids were born, she was along for countless hikes, backcountry ski trips, and mountain bike rides.

She was there when we brought our first child home from the hospital. She was there when we brought our second child home.

She ate a lot of birthday cake off the floor. She lapped up a lot of spilled milk. She tolerated a lot of busy little hands.

But the teeth of time had been gnawing at Abby. What was once a golden streak of canine joy had slowed to a stiff-legged old dog. Walks around town became walks around the block, and walks around the block were painfully slow.

Some days, she had a hard time just getting out of bed. When she did, she could barely stand. In recent weeks, she was beset by a series of ominous seizures.

My wife and I kept hoping she would die, peacefully, in her sleep. Though her body was failing, her indomitable heart kept beating.

Then came the day when she couldn't get up. She fouled her bed and her eyes, full of guilt, watched as we cleaned up the mess. The significance was clear: Abby had enjoyed a long and full life, but her days were at an end.

It was time to die.

I called the vet, a friend of ours, and that evening she walked up the hill to our house. The lights were low and our children were in bed.

A candle flickered on the counter as the vet injected a sedative.

I could have stopped it then, shooing the vet out the door, and holding onto Abby for a few days more. But I didn't.

The vet injected a powerful anesthetic. Abby's heart, which had beaten like a metronome through the many phases of my family's life, finally slowed - and then stopped altogether.

It was the first time I had ever stopped the beating heart of something I loved.

Afterwards, I thought of Kathie LaFortune, whose husband Jim died late last year. Kathie kept a blog, and on the day Jim died, she wrote something to the effect of, "Sometimes we treat our pets better than the people we love."

Especially in Idaho.

The Gem State is filled with sanctimonious legislators who, using assisted suicide as a ruse, have given doctors and nurses veto power over the end-of-life directives written by patients.

No one should be forced to participate in assisted suicide. As I have seen, stopping a beating heart is a weighty emotional burden.

But when a dying patient says "no" to breathing tubes rammed down her throat, or pounding on her chest, then health care providers must respect those wishes. "Do Not Resuscitate" orders should not be overridden by doctors and nurses with an agenda, regardless of what their "conscience" tells them.

To be clear: Withholding or withdrawing extraordinary measures is not assisted suicide. It is a natural death, with dignity.

It's time the theocrats who dominate Idaho politics recognize this basic concept. When a patient is on her deathbed, the terms of her departure are for her and her loved ones to dictate.

Now if you'll excuse me, I need to bury my dog.