



Waiting for a Sign

By Lisa Havelin, MA, MFA, LAMFT

The fact is we don't know a whole lot about how animals communicate, but we certainly know that they do. It's possible there is a lot more communication happening between us and our animals than we are sometimes aware of, or give ourselves (or them) credit for. It's an opportunity to develop our emotional intelligence and also to shift our attention to both the verbal and *non-verbal* ways that we communicate.

Interspecies communication is mysterious at best, and yet we know that we communicate with our animals every day and that they communicate with us. But how do we do it? And how much is understood? Communication takes on profound importance when we are companioning our beloved animal through illness and death. They can't tell us where it hurts, what makes them most comfortable, or what their wishes are as they make their way through this final transition.

We wish to honor our pet's dying process while wanting also to alleviate their suffering. We understand our obligation to them as guardians and the responsibility of taking care of them in their final days and moments, and yet we also know them as unique individuals with desires and thoughts of their own. People often say that they are "waiting for a sign" from their dear one, something that lets them know that the *time has come*.

Remembering that the two of you have been communicating throughout your relationship and that you are the ultimate authority on how that has occurred is a place to begin. Take a moment to reflect on the specific ways you and your pet "talk" with one another. In your minds' eye take yourself through a typical day – it often begins with waking up, going "potty" and having some breakfast. Even in those brief moments it is easy to determine that there are so very many examples of communication and it is helpful to take a mental note of all of the ways that occurs. Yawns and "kisses", a look, attentive posture, wags, purrs, going to the door. We look at them questioning and they look at us confirming. We ask them if they have to go potty and they confirm... they do!

We learn to understand a great deal about what our pet is communicating to us and we develop a sense of "knowing" them in an intuitive way. When things are going fine and there is little at stake, we

have no trouble trusting that intuition. We have this ability with people, too, and we don't question it much, but with humans we can verify its accuracy verbally. However, when we are faced with the seriousness of illness and death and the fear that often accompanies such a situation, we sometimes find that end-of-life discussion just too painful to talk about and too heartbreaking to "listen" to. In those very difficult moments when so much is at stake, we sometimes forget or lose track of our intuition and our ability to communicate the way we normally do. It is just much more difficult to center ourselves and connect with our dear animal in times of crisis and pain.

Plan to take some private, reflective time to talk with your pet. In preparation, try to make sure that you will not be disturbed. Find a comfortable place to sit with your pet and take a few deep, centering breaths. As you begin to talk, be open to the ways you are experiencing the communication and attentive to the ways you are "hearing" from your pet. These may be thoughts, emotions, body sensations, images, and intuitions. Take note of what you are hearing, remembering also to let there be silence or gaps in what you are saying in order to make room for "hearing". You can say as much or as little as makes sense to you.

Things to talk about:

- what they have done for you / what they have meant to you
- what you are grateful for
- what you would like to apologize for
- what you know about their condition and that it is not going to get better
- that euthanasia is an option for them
- what you are struggling with
- what you have questions about
- that you are waiting for them to give you a sign
- that even though you will be very sad when they are gone, that you will be OK, and that it is OK for them to go

We don't necessarily know that our pets understand all of the words that we say, but is it not possible that they "hear" some part of what we are expressing to them from our hearts? When we gather ourselves to give expression to our thoughts and feelings there is power in it.