When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge.

There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together.

There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable ... 

This is the beginning of a poem by an unknown author who describes the passing of a pet. The pet travels across the bridge, where he is happy, free to run and healthy. He waits for his owner to join him again.

Veterinarians deal with euthanasia every day. When we euthanize a pet we take a piece of the owner's heart. Nothing in pet ownership is more difficult than making a decision to euthanize a companion.

Veterinarians have to balance the welfare of the pet with the feelings of the owner. Some owners delay euthanasia, and our job is to advise them on the right time to make a decision.

My feeling is that an owner should be ready to let a pet go before the euthanasia takes place. We advise owners when quality of life issues make euthanasia the best option. When all other treatments are exhausted, euthanasia is the humane option. Discussions with the veterinarian should include additional medical and surgical options, the right time to euthanize and aftercare.

Veterinarians always look at a pet euthanasia as an act of kindness. No matter what the circumstances we always try to be compassionate.

Mariann and "Doc" are the best pet owners any four-legged friend could hope for. With a park-like yard and comfortable pillows to sleep on, their home is puppy paradise. Bo was a very old Newfoundland. After surviving a bout of malignant oral melanoma, he started having problems keeping himself clean as he could barely rise without assistance. In spite of daily pain medication he was failing. In an act of love for their pet the family made a decision in the best interest of Bo.

Sadie came to our office for a dental evaluation after a visit to the emergency hospital. In spite of antibiotics, she was not eating well. She needed anesthesia for a good oral examination. A biopsy of a small mass in the mouth revealed a nasal carcinoma. At the two-week recheck, the tumor had grown, and the owner made a very emotional decision. The pain and discomfort were ended. Sadie was at peace.

My own Vicky was a Jack Russell. She was a big dog in a 16-pound package. As an old dog she began to breathe heavily and lost her appetite. Blood work, radiographs and a cardiac ultrasound did not reveal the problem. An abdominal ultrasound was also normal. Antibiotics and intravenous fluids kept her going.

She sat in my lap for hours of fluid therapy on and off for weeks, but eventually she had multiple organ failure. With great pain to me but a relief to her I gave her a final injection. She is buried in our country garden at the rainbow bridge.

The poem continues:

All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.

The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent. His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.
Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together ...

-- Author unknown

Lawrence Gerson is a veterinarian and founder of the Point Breeze Veterinary Clinic. His column appears biweekly. The intent of this column is to educate pet owners. Consultation with a veterinarian is necessary to diagnose and treat individual pets. If you have a question you'd like addressed in Pet Points, e-mail petpoints@post-gazette.com. Please include your name and municipality or neighborhood.

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