

Fifi's Death: An Autoethnographic Account about Companion Animal Bereavement, (Disenfranchised) Grief, and Communication

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Multispecies relationships can be serious, intimate bonds that are constituted and maintained through communicative practices between a human and more-than-human animal (e.g., dog). Loss of a companion animal (CA) can evoke feelings of invalidation and disenfranchised grief due to empathetic failures of other humans in understanding and acknowledging CA bonds as well as bereavement. However, "continuing bonds" are one way that the bereaved can process their grief and move toward post-traumatic growth. Through an ecofeminist lens, I utilize autoethnographic methods centered around the sudden and traumatic loss of Fifi (dog). Implications for communication research, theory/concepts, and future research are also discussed.

Preface

Below is a preface about companion animal (CA) bereavement. This prelude is important to share because my personal experiences influence the research process (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, I find it methodologically important to share the following:

Forever, I am haunted by the phrase, "Well, *it* was just a dog." ...*It*? Fifi [dog] was not an "it." Were people calling her an "it" because she walked on four legs? Because she didn't speak a *human* language? She was not inanimate. Even just looking at her in a photograph, one could deduce *her*. Her personality. Her spirit. Her light. Her being. She was a golden-white Labrador Retriever mix with black nails, a black muzzle, and cinnamon-bun ears (see Figure 1). Perfection. There

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was a slight curl in her tail, somewhat like a Shiba Inu. She smiled in photographs. Saying she ‘smiled’ is not anthropomorphism. It is *critical* anthropomorphism. Critical anthropomorphism actively uses, “anthropomorphic projections stemming from the permanent perspective of embodied anthropocentrism together with criteria that assist in discerning trustworthy anthropomorphism from naïve anthropomorphism,” (Karlsson, 2012, pp. 711-712). Critical anthropomorphism asserts traits that are seen as typically and solely unique to humans are by *no* means restricted only to our species, as traits that are believed to be unique to humans have been seen, measured, and could still be undiscovered in other animals (e.g., King, 2013). More will be discussed about these phenomena in the forthcoming essay. Drawing from such knowledge, I invite you to spectate on my journey of loss, (disenfranchised) grief, and reflection surrounding the death of Fifi—who was a member of our family, who was loved so dearly.

Lastly, I would like to make the reader aware of the seemingly “unconventional” organization of this account. According to our academic standards—which do not often include embodied, emotional, and/or more-than-human¹ accounts—this essay deviates from our traditional organizational patterns. However, in reflecting on an embodied experience via an autoethnographic lens, such “traditional” organization seems insincere, erasing, and strips away my ability to attempt to portray the disorder, grief, and multiplicity of this experience. These feelings have bubbled up and down over the last 2.5 years. Yes, it has taken me this long to compose the essay. Each time that I have sat down to write about this experience, I am met with crushing sadness, blurry vision from the stream of tears that race down my face, and the painful re-living of many of the negative experiences that surrounded Fifi’s death. Thus, the (dis)organization that follows is intentional and a purposeful methodological choice (to be explained more in what follows). Below, I begin with a personal journal excerpt about Fifi’s death as journaling was one way that I catalogued this experience, and it was a processing strategy, too.

¹ The term “more-than-human” refers to beings that are not of the human species, such as dogs, birds, and even other living entities like plants, trees, etc. (see Plec, 2013). However, using “more-than-human” versus “nonhuman” is intentional. “Nonhuman” reinforces a binary where we only come to know other living beings by identifying them as ‘not human’ and, thus, human qualities serve as the basis for comparison and reinforce a human-centric hierarchy. Such actions further perpetuate binaries that this research (and much research within internatural communication) seeks to challenge.



January 3, 2020: The Day Fifi Died

Somehow, I drifted to sleep around 10:15pm on January 3, 2020, and at 10:41pm I woke to my cell phone ringing. I had missed the call by the time I got to my phone, but I immediately redialed the number. It was the emergency vet, the vet we [my spouse and I] had just left a mere hour ago. Before I even connected with anyone on the other line, my heart sank and I began wailing to Lenny [spouse;

pseudonym used for blind review], saying, “*Oh my god Lenny, Fifi’s [dog] going to die, I just know it. She’s dying.*” I screamed. My ears were ringing. Someone on the other line was saying, “*Hello? Hello?*” The receptionist somehow understood my incoherent rambling and she connected me to the veterinarian. He was compassionately direct about Fifi’s condition. He said:

Yeah, she’s a very sick dog. Her blood panel test is worse, much worse. It shouldn’t be looking like this after a blood transfusion and receiving medication injections. She’s really suffering. I called Dr. C [Fifi’s primary vet] to get her blessing before I called you to tell you this, but I don’t think Fifi is going to respond to treatment. We’ve done everything we can.

Confused and shocked, I asked if that meant we need to “put her down.” Dr. O (the emergency vet) said that he couldn’t tell us what to do, but that he didn’t think she’d recover and that she was extremely sick. He advised us to come back to the clinic quickly. As I hung up the call, I couldn’t stop the muffled screams and moans coming out of me. Sobbing and telling Lenny, “*She is going to die, I knew it. I can’t believe it. We are losing her, oh my god Lenny she’s gonna be gone.*” [Wailing; I fall down, crashing on our hardwood floor]. Lenny picks me up. I put on some warmer clothes, and we leave our house.

The car ride was silent, except for my sobbing and occasional muttering of, “*I can’t believe that she’s going to die. Oh my god, Lenny. Why? Lenny, I don’t want to do this. Please... Oh my god.*” We arrived at the emergency vet 30 minute later, both of us sobbing uncontrollably. People waiting in the lobby turned their heads sharply as we entered. The vet techs let us back immediately and as soon as we got into our waiting room, they carried our beloved Fifi in. Then, Dr. O entered. To be truthful, I don’t remember much of the conversation with him. I know he said that her blood panel numbers were horrible and that they plummeted from the last blood test, which was taken after her blood transfusion at 4:00pm earlier that day. By this time, it was about 11:20pm. He said that her blood panel shouldn’t be like that if she was responding to treatment and that he didn’t think that she could recover at this point.

Fifi seemed incognizant and delirious. Randomly, she would try to get up, but physically couldn’t. She seemed disoriented. Her breathing was shallow. Her eyes lost their glow. Her tail didn’t wag anymore. She didn’t look into my eyes anymore. I felt like an annoyance to her at this point. Intuitively, I knew she was dying. Amidst this tragedy, I knew that I didn’t want to be selfish and draw this

out for her, to make her experience anymore pain. It cut me deep, deep into my bones. My chest was tight, the area around my kidneys felt like a million tiny knives were being pierced through my skin. My heartbeat was in my head. The dry mouth was uncanny. A “shiny” metallic spit taste was in my mouth. Vomit was rising in my esophagus.

The vet tech came in with paperwork to discuss Fifi’s euthanasia and our options for her remains. I signed the papers for her euthanasia, to have her cremated, and to have a keepsake pawprint made before her cremation. She told us that we could take as much time as we needed to say our goodbyes and that we just had to knock on the door when we were ready. Crying was a perpetual state at this point, for both Lenny and me. A few times during these last few moments with Fifi, Lenny and I looked at each other, hugged and kissed, while caressing Fifi.

We both softly hugged and kissed Fifi numerous times over the next 25 minutes. We told her how much happiness she brought to us, how special and smart she was, how much she’ll be missed and how sorry we were that this happened to her. I told her,

I am sorry, baby girl. I’m so sorry [grasp; heave; swallow the vomit back down] for not, for not doing more to take care of you. I should’ve acted faster. I feel like I’ve failed you and I am so sorry [sniffles; weeping]. I hope you can forgive me [wavering, deep sob, shaking]. I can’t wait to see you again and I hope you visit me in my dreams. We are going to miss you and your tippy-toe dance right before dinner time, your weeny-whining at squirrels, your “stretchy” yoga pose when you wanted attention, your curious nudging with your shiny black-button nose, your little squinty face that greeted us every morning when making coffee, your “superwoman” runs around the back yard after you poop, and all the joy you bring to our lives. I love you so much, thank you for being my best friend. You made my life better, better than I could have ever asked for [sobbing, blurry vision, wet face, shaking].

Somehow and at some point, we knocked on the door. I feel guilty even writing about that...how could I have knocked on the door? That meant her death.

When Dr. O entered to administer the euthanasia, he explained what each of the three tubes were. The first was fluid to clear her IV port and veins, the second white vile was a chemical to make her sleepy and relaxed, and the last blue vile was what would stop her heart. Lenny and I both broke down when we heard

those words. How could a dog with so much heart and love in her, have her heart stopped? It was a paradox. It was unfair. It was unreal. It was the signal of her end.

Dr. O began administering the tubes. Fifi tried to get up and move away when he administered the clearing-fluid. I wrapped my arms around her, gently, holding her. Her head rest on my left elbow, on top of my red and blue North Face windbreaker. My right arm gently hugged her shoulders, while Lenny caressed her stomach and back legs. I began kissing her head, telling her, "*It's okay baby, it's okay. We love you so much.*" Dr. O put the white vile in the IV port. Her eyes rolled in the back of her head, and I felt her head get so heavy on my left arm. The blue vile went in moments later and the rise and fall of her tummy stopped. A limpness came over her; there was a soft drop of our 55-pound dog into our arms. Pain filled my heart. I felt my throat tighten so much so that I began to gasp for air. Dr. O put his stethoscope on her chest and said, "*she's gone,*" at least I think that's what he said. I don't remember exactly. Regardless, I knew that the Fifi I knew and loved so dearly was gone from this Earth. It was unbearable. *It is unbearable.* They told us to take our time and let us know when we were ready. As soon as they left, I began frantically checking her, like almost double checking to see if she was really dead. I couldn't leave her if she wasn't dead, but *how* was she really dead?

Her eyes were lifeless, and her eyelids wouldn't stay shut, against my repeated attempts to close them. Her tongue was slightly sticking out of her mouth, and I could see her chipped front tooth, which was slightly yellowed (but from what, we don't know). We said another host of goodbyes, thank yous, looking forward to seeing you again some days, sorrys, and our final hugs and kisses. She left us right before midnight on January 3, 2020.

Idiopathic immune-mediated thrombocytopenia (IMT) rapidly took Fifi's life over the course of 72 hours. I don't know what time it was when we left her lifeless body, but as we checked out, they refunded me about \$900 since I had initially paid for her care through Sunday. The vet tech came out and gave us the keepsake pawprint, which had pieces of Fifi's fur stuck in it. Sobbing, we walked out to the car. A small sense of relief came over me, knowing that she wasn't suffering anymore. Almost instantaneously, that dissipated, and sorrow bubbled back up and consumed me. Silence echoed throughout the car on the ride home. The only sounds present were deep breaths between our sobs, sniffing, and soft, high-pitched shrieks that were involuntarily emerging from me. Lenny and I held hands the whole ride home. I think we got home around 12:45am. I don't

remember how I fell asleep, but somehow, at some point, I did. I remember that night thinking that I, too, wanted to die. I actively wanted to die. I thought about ways to make that happen because I just couldn't live beyond this, I thought. Not only did I want to escape the pain of losing Fifi, but I also felt like a failure. Like a selfish ass that let my beloved best friend die in a horrible, painful way *and* I chose to euthanize her. The paradox of her living (without euthanasia) and suffering versus her being euthanized to relieve her suffering did not compute in my mind In those moments. Either way, I was losing. Either way, I was failing as her guardian. Either way, I did fail in my own mind. Either way, she was dying for 72 hours. Now, she is dead. Sadness wells up inside. [Cry. Heave. Cry. Drool seeps out of the corners of my mouth. Decline calls. Sit, stare. Numb...].

I still can't wear that red and blue North Face windbreaker. I had it on the night that I last held Fifi. I had it on when she went from alive to in pain to suffering to dead. I've stowed it away in the hall closet. It's the only closet in this house with a door to hide it from my view.



An Introduction to Human-Companion Animal Bonds and Bereavement

While 70% of United States households have a companion animal (CA)—commonly referred to as a “pet”—CA bereavement is an understudied topic, especially within the communication discipline (APPA, 2021; Wong et al., 2017). While bereavement associated with human-related death is a topic rich with empirical research, there are unique features associated with CA bereavement. Multispecies relationships—such as human-CA relationships—are often composed of deep social, emotional, biological, and physiological bonds (Borgi & Cirulli, 2016; Nagasawa et al., 2009, 2015). Thus, the loss of such a relationship, especially in an unexpected and tragic manner, can have adverse effects for the surviving individual(s). In this case when considering the human as the survivor, the experience of CA bereavement can be exacerbated by “disenfranchised grief.” However, one positive form of coping with CA death *and* disenfranchised grief is through creating “continuing bonds.” Continuing bonds function as a coping mechanism that often signals the beginning of posttraumatic growth and helps to establish a post-death emotional connection with a deceased entity, despite the physical separation.

In this essay, I examine CA bereavement autoethnographically through an ecofeminist lens and internatural communication underpinnings. I center the

essay around the sudden, traumatic death of Fifi [dog]. I seek to explore the emotional, embodied, relational, and communicative elements of how I have experienced/ing bereavement, (disenfranchised) grief, and posttraumatic growth. In explicating my experience through autoethnographic vignettes as a middle-class professional, cisgender woman-mother-partner, I describe communicative phenomena related to bereavement, (disenfranchised) grief and its association with anthropocentrism, and posttraumatic growth in the context of the sudden, traumatic death of Fifi. I draw on experiences we shared, individual experiences, workplace encounters, encounters in veterinarian medical settings, and contextualize these experiences with extant research. I examine definitions of bereavement, (disenfranchised) grief, and multispecies relationships byway of “internatural communication” groundings. Mindfully, I explore how my experiences and nuanced interactions may serve as exemplars of hope and possibilities for change within the Anthropocene, explicitly highlighting the implications for communication. Specifically, I offer critical anthropocentrism and internatural communication as starting points for growing our disciplinary knowledge. Below, I start with reviewing why autoethnography is an appropriate methodology for this endeavor. I also provide a brief background on ecofeminism and internatural communication as these are theoretical underpinnings that influence my approach and perspectives in this essay.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an approach to research that seeks to illuminate and *systematically* analyze personal experience(s) (Ellis, 2004). In doing this, cultural experiences can be better understood through the processing of *doing* and *writing* autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015). This approach to research challenges orthodox methods of research and the ways in which individuals are treated and represented in research settings (Adams et al., 2015). Further, autoethnography expands ontological, epistemological, and axiological boundaries for social science and the humanities (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). A specific form that autoethnography can take is layered accounts.

Layered, personal accounts are a cross of two forms of autoethnography. Layered accounts focus on an author’s experience, which is positioned alongside data and/or extant literature. Using vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection, layered accounts aspire to transport readers to into an experience or perhaps help readers better understand a particular identity, such as being a

bereaved CA guardian/owner (Ellis, 1999; Rambo, 2005; Ronai, 1992). Personal narratives can be described as stories in which authors position themselves as the phenomenon. Personal narratives strive to help readers understand the author's sense of "self" or some aspect of a life within a specific cultural context, hopefully inspiring readers to use what they learn to reflect on, understand, and cope with their personal experiences (Ellis, 2004). Through combining layered accounts and personal narratives, I aim to position my own experiences surrounding CA bereavement, disenfranchised grief, and (critical) anthropocentrism in the larger cultural context of the communication discipline, extant research, as well as within the larger context of advocating for change within our culture and discipline when it comes to CA bereavement and related grief. In doing this, I use my ecofeminist lens.

Ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a (radical) vein of feminism that shapes my perspective. Theoretically, ecofeminism helps us understand the "mutually supportive lines of oppression as well as a specific focus on the ways gender, race, class, and other structures of domination are intertwined with the human domination of the other-than-human world," (Rogers, 2008, p. 284; see also Abram, 1996; Adams & Gruen, 2014; Plumwood, 1993; Schutten & Rogers, 2011). According to Plumwood (1993), ecofeminism opposes a core Western, master identity that centers on exclusion, promotes dualisms and binaries, objectifies individuals (inclusive to the more-than-human animals), and denies "others." This master identity gives way to systems of oppression, exploitation, and seemingly privileges Western masculine qualities (Plumwood, 1993; Rogers, 2008, Day, 2018). A primary function of the master identity is the denial of the master's (inter)dependency on "others," such as more-than-human animals, nature, women, people of color, and people of the working class (Plumwood, 1993; Rogers & Schutten, 2004). In placing "others" in the background and portraying them as insignificant, "the real role and contribution of the 'other' is obscured in culture, and the economic relation is denied, mystified, or presented in paternalistic terms," (Plumwood, 1993, p. 49). Further, ecofeminism also seeks to critique dualisms and binaries, such as human-nature, human-animal, professional-personal, body-mind, etc. (see Rogers, 2008; Day, 2018). Such dualisms and binaries promote otherness, separation byway of unacknowledging interconnectedness and interdependency, and strip sentient beings of agency (see Day, 2018; Day, 2017); as such, ecofeminism has high utility as a lens for this autoethnographic account that seeks to illuminate the seriousness of multispecies relationships, CA bereavement, aims to promote communication-centric coping mechanisms for CA bereavement and

(disenfranchised) grief, and strives to facilitate an inclusive discipline for such topics. While such topics are not entirely new to our discipline, they are just beginning to gain scholarly traction under the sub-disciplinary home of “internatural communication.” In fact, ecofeminism is an influential framework that contributed to aspects of internatural communication (see Plec, 2013).

Internatural communication. Plec’s (2013) edited book, *Perspectives on Human-Animal Communication: Internatural Communication*, is a foundational work for communication scholars regarding human-animal-nature communication. Plec specifically coins as “internatural communication” to address such phenomena. Plec (2013) defines internatural communication as “the exchange of intentional energy between humans and other animals as well as communication among animals and other forms of life” (p. 6). The first of its kind in the discipline of communication, the edited book presents foundations for inquiry surrounding internatural, human-animal communication. Thus, ecofeminism as well as internatural communication serve an applicable lens for this autoethnography about Fifi’s death and subsequent experiences of CA bereavement and (disenfranchised) grief.

CA Bereavement



January 4, 2020: One Day without Fifi

I woke up the next day (after Fifi died), disoriented. Coming to the reality of what had happened in about 30 seconds, I began to sob, waking Lenny up. Sobbing together, we made ourselves get out of bed to care for Addie and Molly. Lenny thinks we should go do something. Anything I want. I can’t even process what that means. I want Fifi back. I want her here. “*Lenny, what do you mean?*” Jump to two hours later, and I am showered and dressed. No recollection as to how this occurred. Maybe Lenny? I am in my car, but he’s driving. I grab my ballcap from the backseat. Put it on my head. I begin sobbing, but at least I am hidden, a little, behind my hat. We ended up going to Home Depot and a pizza parlor for lunch. I almost threw up at the idea of eating pizza at a restaurant, the day after Fifi tragically died. What is wrong with me? How could I do this? I begin wailing at the pizza parlor. People think Lenny and I are breaking up.

I have never felt this sad. Sad is an insufficient word to describe my state. Heart break, trauma, gut-wrenching pain, disbelief, anger, hopelessness, no will to go on, blank, emptiness...what is a word that encapsulates all of that? I can’t

accept her death, for many reasons, but especially because the way she died was so tragic and painful. It's so unfair. So unexpected. In many ways, I feel betrayed by the world and misunderstood by so many humans who don't understand and empathize with the horrendous experience of losing a more-than-human family member.

The guilt I feel is crippling. Haunting. Sleepless nights pondering, what if I'd taken her to the regular vet on Thursday morning (January 2) versus Friday morning (January 3)? What if I had taken her to the emergency vet for the first time on the 31st, versus the 1st. My heart skips a beat. A taste of vomit floods my mouth. Garlic from the pizza. Regret. Tears begin racing down my face. Sweat leaks through my skin, populating the cotton shirt I am wearing. Now, everybody knows.

I've taken up smoking, tobacco. In a roundabout way, I thought "*is this self-destructive behavior?*" I know smoking will kill me, but maybe that's what I deserve. Maybe it's what I want because I failed. I failed Fifi. I am in a dark, sad place. Do I care to even try to get out here? No, not right now. I feel like I deserve it. Fifi was only 9.5 years old. She deserved to live much longer. Both her sisters are still alive and well—how is she not?



CA bereavement is serious. Yet, the emotional turmoil that is associated with CA bereavement is often seen as less legitimate and less serious. However, the death of a CA can equal or surpass the psychological turmoil of the death of an important human person (Packman et al., 2011; Sable, 2013). Similar to experiencing an important human's death, CA death is also associated with severe depression, anxiety, insomnia, somatization, severe disruption to social life and daily activities (Bussolari et al., 2021; Habarth et al., 2017; Hunt & Padilla, 2006).

CA bereavement has many similarities to human bereavement, but it also has unique features. CA bereavement may be worse for some individuals due to the inability to communicate with their animal. Specifically, some individuals may feel that they are responsible for their animal's death and suffer from a severe sense of remorse and inadequacy especially since their animal cannot communicate with them about their levels of pain or other important end-of-life topics (Adrian et al., 2009; Butler & Degraff, 1996; Topal et al., 2009). These experiences related to CA bereavement fluctuate depending on the human-animal bond, social support, whether the human is married and has children in the home, and if the human had

to decide about euthanasia for their animal (Juth et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2017). Social networks and related social constraints are a major factor in the bereave individual's post-death experiences.



January 14, 2020: "Family" perspectives on my bereavement

Today, I was enraged by a "family" member. They are not a family member in my eyes because they've never supported me or been (that) present in my life. They are only "family" through marriage. Anyhow, this person didn't think I was within hearing-range, and they said to another family member, "God, it was just a dog. Like, come on. Stop being so sensitive. Can she stop crying about it already? You'd think she lost a child or got diagnosed with cancer. She's being so dramatic." As soon as I deduced that she was finished, I walked into the room she was in. Her face went pale. Her mouth fell open. She looked like she was about to start saying something, but I quickly looked at her with tears in my eyes (not from her words, but from crying earlier about Fifi). I said, "Fuck you." I turned around and left.



Invalidating a person's bereavement from losing a CA can exacerbate their grief. A primary contributor to discounting grief experiences from CA death emerges from social contexts and various social constraints (Juth et al., 2015). When this occurs, the bereaved often experience symptoms of depression, declining physical health, functional impairment, and increased levels of stress (Habarth et al., 2017; Juth et al., 2015; Lepore & Revenson, 2007). Oftentimes, social networks do not possess the ability to provide adequate support to a person who lost a CA (see Juth et al., 2015). In a society that privileges human experiences and promotes the Western, master identity (Plumwood, 1993; Rogers, 2008; XXX-1), it seems feasible that CA bereavement would not be taken seriously, and that associated grief would be invalidated, or "disenfranchised."

Disenfranchised Grief



January 18, 2020

I'm at work today for the first time since Fifi died. A coworker walks past my office, passing by my half-open door. The coworker slowly backs up and stand in the doorway. "Hey, Asbleigh, how's it going?" I engage in this mindless chitchat, although it seems like the bane of my existence at this point because I just want to be alone. At the end of this 'chitchat,' I say, "Well, I'm actually not feeling so great. It's been hard for me to accept that Fifi died, especially the way she did." Coworker looks stunned that I would bring up death in a chitchat conversation, but hey, it's my reality and they asked how I was. Don't ask me if you don't want the truth, especially right now. Don't expect me to *perform* for you either, especially right now. "Oh my gosh, Asbleigh, I am so sorry. Was Fifi your niece?" I paused for a moment and said, "No, she was my dog." This coworker hastily remarks, "Oh right, I saw your post on social media. Wow, that was over break, right? Aw, and you're still [emphasis] feeling this bad? You poor thing." I clenched my teeth together so hard to refrain from firing back to this individual. I thought my teeth might crack in the moment. "Well, I have to get back to grading. Take care, [name of coworker]." I get up and shut the door while they are still standing in front of it in the hallway.



Disenfranchised grief is a pattern of empathic failures (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). Within a social system, disenfranchised grief manifests as a person's inability to understand the meaning and experience of another, which can subtly or obviously invalidate a bereaved person and their loss narrative (Bussolari et al., 2018). This experience can be further traumatizing for a person that just lost their precious CA; however,

Invalidation and a failure to understand the meaning of loss happens frequently for bereaved pet owners, as their support system does not often validate the profound depth, unconditional love, and longevity of their relationship. In fact, because an animal's lifespan is normally shorter than that of a human, bereaved pet owners may undergo numerous disenfranchised losses throughout their lives. (Bussolari et al., 2021, p. 391).

Negative impacts from CA bereavement are often intensified when disenfranchised grief is experienced, which can include social withdrawal, feeling isolated, and disconnecting from social relationships that purport disenfranchised grief (Toray, 2004). Such experiences can make posttraumatic growth and recovery difficult and serve to make the bereaved feel incapable of moving forward. Even worse, grief associated with CA bereavement may not be acknowledged and validated by others at all, as it is not the “norm” within the anthropocentric, patriarchal, neoliberal society that dominates the U.S. (Bussolari et al., 2018; Rogers, 2008; Schutten, 2008). Much of these invalidating actions towards CA bereavement coincide with the ideology of anthropocentrism.

Disenfranchised grief and anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism beckons disenfranchising the grief associated with CA bereavement. Anthropocentrism is an ideology that places the human being at the center of the universe, privileging humans as the most significant entity in the universe and privileging human values and experiences over other entities’, such as more-than-humans (e.g., Crist & Kopnina, 2014). This communicatively constructed perspective views humans as separate from and superior to other beings, denying the interconnection and independence humans have with more-than-humans, which systematically permeates public policy and education, among other aspects of life (e.g., Schutten, 2008; Day, 2018).

Within neoliberal, patriarchal ideology, “nonhumans” are a commodity *for humans*. The subject-object binary helps to perpetuate animals as commodity because for animals to be a commodity, their status as individual, sentient, social beings must be removed, which is done through positioning them as “objects,” low within the human-animal hierarchy (DeMello, 2012). Since “objects” are void of individuality and intentionality, such commoditization is acceptable and embedded within the neoliberal, patriarchal ideology (Day, 2018). Further, through using more-than-humans in an objectified, commoditized fashion, the larger human-animal separation is propagated (Schutten, 2008; Day, 2018). However, acknowledging the interconnectedness among humans-animals-nature threatens this ideology as it reframes how more-than-humans are viewed.

Internatural communication, CA bereavement studies, and related theorizing acknowledge and value more-than-human animals. This ideology threatens the neoliberal, patriarchal ideology, and the commodity status of “nonhuman” animals because “When we grant that animals have subjectivity, including their own interests, wants, and desires, it comes more difficult to justify many of the practices that humans engage in with animals,” (DeMello, 2012, p. 6). As

communication scholars have socially constructed what (human) communication means in our field, we too, are implicated through our discipline's large-scale disengagement with more-than-humans and internatural phenomena because binarized "objects" can be evoked through exclusion, too (Day, 2018; Day, 2017). As related to CAs, they can also be commoditized within the larger, macro structure of neoliberalism. A neoliberal, patriarchal agenda largely minimizes or removes more-than-humans and the humans who value them from mainstream narratives and ideology. In the global, dominant neoliberal approach to more-than-humans, "local" and nondominant explanations, ideas, and practices related to animals and nature are displaced (e.g., Braun, 2007; Maye et al., 2014). However, there is hope for those experiencing CA bereavement and (disenfranchised) grief. By reviewing posttraumatic growth strategies, individuals may be able to cope with such losses and a cultural shift can be promoted by way of acknowledging such practices.

Posttraumatic Growth



March 11, 2020: Two Months without Fifi

I am in Tucson, AZ today, visiting my Mom on spring break. I brought some of Fifi's cremains with me, all the way from Texas. I knew that I wanted to spread some of her spirit back in Arizona, the place where we found each other and spent the first five years of relationship together. I struggle a little to decide on where she should be spread...I ended up thinking that Gates Pass in Tucson Mountain Park was the best place. It was peaceful, beautiful, majestic, heart-warming, just like Fifi. Additionally, Fifi and I had hiked here many times together.

On the drive out to the mountain park, I had a sense of crushing sadness and depression come over me. My Mom was with me, but I had sunglasses on, and she couldn't tell—not that I was trying to hide it. Suddenly, I took a few deep breaths and I felt calm. I was still sad, sad at the thought of reliving Fifi's death and the realization that she is gone, but I felt calm. There was a sense of relief in knowing that I was putting some of her spirit in a place that I think she loved, in the city that she was born and where we started our amazing journey together.

As we arrived at Gates Pass, we walked a ways up the trail, almost to the base of the mountain. I took a few photos of the beautiful landscape: cacti, desert flowers in bloom, ocotillo, various shades of tan, browns, jasper reds in the sand

and dirt, saguaros, clear blue skies, mountain views for days. I spread some of her ashes half-way up this trail, off to the side, near some blooming brittle brush and a congregation of barrel cacti. I placed the rest of her ashes off to the side of the David Yetman trailhead sign, closer to the parking area.

Something that was odd: I felt bad throwing away the empty Ziploc baggie that held Fifi's ashes. The baggie was empty, but the plastic on the inside was dusty white due to her ashes. While the baggie was empty, I knew that some of her was still in there, clinging to the microscopic openings in the plastic. So, I held onto the plastic baggie for the rest of the day, keeping it in my pocket. I couldn't bear to lose anymore of her.



Posttraumatic growth is a positive change that can occur after the experience of a highly challenging life crisis (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The severity of the trauma, available social support, and individual characteristics impact posttraumatic growth (Spain et al., 2019; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Some exemplars of posttraumatic growth include “an increased appreciation for life, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer spiritual life,” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). More specifically, there are five, core ways that an individual can experience posttraumatic growth from CA bereavement: relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and (more) appreciation of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Extant research has applied these five factors in studying CA bereavement. For example, Packman et al. (2017) reported that “relating to others” was the more prominent theme among bereaved CA owners/guardians. This factor encapsulates forming closer relationships with people due to the bereavement experience and the bereaved feeling increases in empathy from those around them (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Yet, it is important to note here that while many individuals reported to Packman et al. (2017) that they experienced “relating to others,” they also reported that they did not feel socially supported following the death of their CA. Similar findings were reported by Bussolari et al. (2019), but Bussolari et al. also found that bereaved individuals' faith was not increased due to the loss experience but they did report a (positive) spiritual change at some point in their posttraumatic growth.

Fifi was an inspiration. She challenged me to see beyond myself. She taught me many lessons, especially about responsibility, care, acceptance, and healthy, meaningful, loving relationships. Since she's died, I do believe I have an increased

appreciation for life (see Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and, thus, have experienced some posttraumatic growth from my bereavement. Another practice that I believe has helped me experience posttraumatic growth is “continuing bonds.”

Continuing bonds. Resolving grief does not involve ending my relationship with Fifi, who is now deceased; rather, resolving my grief includes renegotiation and transformation of the meaning of her loss...slowly, over time (e.g., Klass et al., 1996). Continuing bonds (CBs) are attempts at coping while simultaneously attempting to continue an emotional connection to the deceased despite the permanent, physical separation (Field et al., 1999). CBs can help an individual transform the meaning of a loss while also sustaining a post-death relationship with the deceased (Field et al., 1999; Klass et al., 1996). Examples of CBs can include dreams, looking at photographs or making videos or collages, reminiscing, storytelling, art, and engaging in rituals such as yearly birthday dinners or creating an altar (see Bussolari et al., 2018, p. 3). Fifi-related (body) art took on a special meaning, for me.



April 18, 2020

Fifi is forever tattooed on me—metaphorically, yes, but I also mean this literally. I have her tattooed on my left quadricep (see Figure 2). It is a picture of her from our wedding, with her flower halo on and her pink and gold-trimmed collar. Full of bright colors, just as she was in life. She is smiling in the photo that I got tattooed on my quadricep. I didn't impose that onto her. It is truly just her essence in the photos from that day. I remember it so well. She walked me down the aisle, along with my mom and biological father (mixed feelings still linger about this decision regarding my father...). Anyhow, I remember so much about that day involving Fifi. She was with me in every moment. I especially remember her being with me when I got dressed, had my makeup and hair done, and when I was in the bridal den, waiting to walk down the aisle to marry Lenny. I remember everyone laughing as we all walked down the aisle. Fifi was truly the center of attention, not me. Everyone laughed as she showed her excitement (whole-body wiggle, thrashing tail, jumps up onto people, soft 'yips' as if she were greeting people she knows), greeting each guest at the end of the aisle as we made our way to Lenny and the marriage officiant. Although looking at this tattoo of Fifi can evoke tears, it also is a very, very small tribute to her that makes me feel some relief about her death. It helps me remember the joy that she brought into this world

and into our life. It helps me remember the special times that I did get to share with her, like our wedding. It helps me remember how fortunate I am to have had such a special bond with such a special being. It helps me keep that bond alive. It helps me keep an appreciation for Fifi, well beyond her earthly death.



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Another way that I have been able to cope with Fifi's death is through creating "centers" in my home (see Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). In seeking out support for the (disenfranchised) grief that I felt after Fifi's death, I actively sought out advice about coping with death. In this venture, I was referenced to the practice of

creating a space specifically dedicated to remembering Fifi. In other avenues of research these have been named “CBs,” “altars,” etc. (see Bussolari et al., 2018). “Centers” are communicative (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). Not only are they intrapersonally communicative to the bereaved, grieving person, but they also are spaces where others can observe, witness, learn, and provide support for the grief that a person is experiencing. Further, these centers can also be sites where the deceased is memorialized.

Rituals and memorials—however they manifest—help establish the “right to grieve” following a death (Doka, 2002). As referenced in previous sections, “the absence of socially sanctioned mourning practices disenfranchises the griever by preventing recognition of the loss, reinforcing the insignificance of the loss, and impeding social support,” (Spain et al., 2019, p. 557). For instance, formal funeral services for a CA are not “normal” in Western cultures and would likely be difficult to cultivate; yet, in other cultures like Japan, pet memorial services mirror that of services for deceased humans and can include the use of coffins, offerings of food, incense, and ‘traditional’ functions of a funeral service (Kenney, 2004). Having the “right to grieve” via socially accepted rituals and memorials—like creating a “center” or holding a memorial service—could help the bereaved heal and learn to cope with death in healthy(ier) ways.

Learning to cope with death. In ways, I believe Fifi helped prepare me for another traumatic loss in my life. Just over one year after Fifi’s death, I experienced the loss of one of my sons. I had spontaneous triplets in March of 2021. On the day of their unexpected birth, my son Cole unexpectedly died in the operating room where I was having a cesarian section (i.e., C-section). No known reason why he died. No warning. Cole’s story is divulged in another reflection.... However, it is meaningful to bring up here because Fifi helped me start to explore my grief and how I can cope with it—but also, her death taught me that I don’t have to hide my grief, my pain, my anger, or my resentment. I don’t have to withdraw my sadness for the sake of others’ (un)comfort. Although Fifi’s death and Cole’s death are qualitatively different, there are lessons that I’ve learned from Fifi’s death that helped me cope with Cole’s death. Still, today, those lessons are helping me process Cole’s death. And again, I am thankful for these lessons that Fifi gave to me as there is an intersection in death experiences—be it among humans and/or CAs.



July 11, 2022

Today we moved into our new home, in a state far away from our last home in Texas. One of the first things I did was make a center. I placed Fifi just off the center of the mantle over the fireplace and placed our angel baby Cole right beside her in the center of the mantle. Having these two loves-of-my-life beside each other brings me some solace. It makes me smile, a bit, to envision Cole with Fifi. The “center” that I started to create for them is in the main room of our new home, so we never forget them and that their spirits live on. In their honor, we’ve placed sage, wooden angel figures holding puppies, a hand-made glass spider, family heirloom cotton doily, two silver deer each holding a purple abundance candle, and signs for each of their names. Every time we’ve had a visitor, I have made it a point to show them this center and introduce the memory of Cole and Fifi.



A Discussion on Moving Forward

Creating disciplinary space that is inclusive to CA bereavement and the associated (disenfranchised) grief that tags along is imperative. Not only do these phenomena impact people greatly, but there are serious communicative implications embedded in these experiences. As such, there is much to be explored when it comes to multispecies relations and associated internatural phenomena, CA bereavement, disenfranchised grief, and posttraumatic growth. Below, I discuss how critical anthropomorphism is a valuable concept for future research in these areas. I end with reflections on why internatural communication is an important subdiscipline that our field should embrace, especially as related to highlighting the multitude of (silenced) voices surrounding these phenomena.

Critical Anthropomorphism

Critical anthropomorphism is well established in other disciplines. This concept actively uses, “anthropomorphic projections stemming from the permanent perspective of embodied anthropocentrism together with criteria that assist in discerning trustworthy anthropomorphism from naïve anthropomorphism,” (Karls-son, 2012, pp. 711-712). When viewing more-than-humans in this way, we can observe that traits that are seen as “human traits” are by *no* means restricted only

to our species. In fact, traits that are believed to be unique to humans have been seen, measured, and could still be undiscovered in other animals, such as grief (e.g., King, 2013; King & Shanker, 2003). Thus, in acknowledging “human traits” in other species, it becomes easier to understand how and why serious, intimate bonds/relationships are formed with more-than-humans, like CA dogs or cats. However, in acknowledging this information, it also disrupts the human-centered hierarchy and, therefore, disrupts the pervasive Western, master identity (Plumwood, 1993; Rogers, 2008).

There are varying approaches to and applications of critical anthropomorphism. One approach heavily relies on external, observable aspects to make correlations between human and more-than-human animal emotions. This approach finds anthropomorphic language appropriate *if* the emotion and the animal that is seen as displaying the emotion are sufficiently familiar (Midgley, 2002). A second approach relies on intersubjective content from reported, phenomenological lived experiences. This approach is based on how humans describe more-than-human animals and their behaviors in relation to their own (human) emotional perceptions, thus, describing common emotional experiences between humans and more-than-human animals (Wemelsfelder et al., 2000). The third approach originates from ethology, suggesting that if humans can repeatedly and accurately correlate and/or predict attributions of more-than-human animal emotional states based on experiential phenomena, then (critical) anthropomorphism is valid in those cases (Andrews, 2009).

The concept of critical anthropomorphism is important for our discipline and theorizing in communication because it provides grounding and support for inter-natural claims and related findings/results. Critical anthropomorphism also challenges the current dogma that surrounds anthropomorphism and the perception of human-animal relations (i.e., the Western master identity noted above), proposing that humans and more-than-human animals *can* share similar emotions, experiences, traits, serious bonds, etc. and asserting such claims do not necessarily mean that humans are projecting “human-specific” qualities onto more-than-human animals. In short, critical anthropomorphism helps link humans and more-than-human animals, particularly asserting that similarities do and can exist, which is extremely important in challenging the human-animal binary and human-privileged hierarchy promoted by anthropocentrism and the Western, master identity (see King, 2013; Plumwood, 1993; Rogers, 2008; Day, 2018).

Reconsidering (Human) Communication: The Need for Internatural Communication

Multispecies relationships are communicatively constituted, managed, negotiated, and (re)created—many times in intimate and significant ways. In fact, it is well known that more-than-human animals have a desire to be social, experience emotions, and form bonds—some even form bonds with species other than their own like what is observed among CAs and their human guardians/owners (Bekoff, 2015; Gruber & Bekoff, 2017; King & Shanker, 2003; Palagi et al., 2016). Many domesticated animals like dogs, ferrets, and horses, for example, understand human gestures and other communicative cues, like eye contact and gaze (Hernádi et al., 2012; Maros et al., 2008; Soproni et al., 2001). As such, through communication and the perception of understanding, intimate bonds are often formed among/between humans and more-than-human animals. This highlights how and why our discipline should be more inclusive to such communication.

Visual and facial processing of more-than-human animals by humans has been found to be greater with CAs than other humans, which some scholars believe may be due to the lack of a verbal language between humans and CAs (Stoekel et al., 2014). Scholars have posited that facial cues of domesticated animals are emotionally embedded and *function as communicative signals*, which often are correlated with increased oxytocin levels in CAs when they interact with their human guardians/owners (Nagasawa et al., 2009, 2015). From a behavioral and neurohormonal standpoint, human-CA relationships have stark similarities with that of human mothers and human infants (Borgi & Cirulli, 2016). Oxytocin is a neuroendocrine regulator (commonly referred to as the “love hormone”) and its presence often signals and is critical for the formation of social bonds (Hurlemann & Scheele, 2016; Rilling & Young, 2014). Associations between a (domesticated) dog’s gaze and urinary oxytocin concentrations from their human guardians’ during interactions have been empirically supported; specifically, the increase in oxytocin in human guardians facilitated their affiliation towards their dog, with the dog also having an increase in oxytocin concentration during these interactions (Nagasawa et al., 2015). Although relationships between humans and domesticated dogs are just one example of the ways in which humans communicate and are impacted by communicative aspects of more-than-human animals, more-than-humans are often still ascribed as part of “other world(s)” —different from our human domain (Noske, 1997) and silenced and/or existing in the margins with the communication discipline.

Despite acknowledgement by other disciplines and *some* communication scholars that more-than-humans communicate and interact in purposeful, meaningful ways with humans, there are limiting “human” biases in the field of communication that limit this type of inquiry. Most of our discipline privileges the *symbolic* activity of humans, often attributing humans as the only (intentional) symbol using beings; however, we are not (e.g., King & Shanker, 2003; Livingstone et al., 2010; Mejdell et al., 2016). Furthermore, our discipline is sparse in attending to corporeality, which are meanings in scent, sound, sight, touch, proximity, position, etc. These “other” ways of sending/receiving messages and dialoguing do, however, inform our structures of communication, sensemaking processes, embodiment, and what we, as human animals, constitute as a communicative act. From a rhetorical standpoint, McKerrow (1989) suggests that attention towards all-encompassing rhetorical acts—through corporeal dialogism and embodiment—are not currently attended to by most scholars in our field. This lack of attention is likely due to our “obsession with the structure and substance of verbal [human] utterances” and written text (Plec, 2013, p. 3). Specifically, McKerrow (1989, 2010) calls for studies that move beyond the Western ways of communicating and analyzing communication. I argue such a proclamation would be inclusive to and appropriate for inquiry surrounding CA bereavement, multi-species relationships, and associated (disenfranchised) grief.

Communication is more than the discursive. Symbolic activity is not confined to humans alone, especially in noting that rhetorical and communicative acts are more than the discursive. Such is practiced by more-than-human animals and their communicative actions as these contribute to human communication, emotions, (re)actions, etc. (DeMello, 2012; Kennedy, 1992; Day, 2018; Day, 2017). Despite the emerging, and at times, underappreciated nature of internatural communication, some communication scholars have explored these topics (e.g., Plec, 2013; Schutten, 2008; Day, 2018; Day, 2017). However, much more is left to be illuminated, questioned, and, perhaps most importantly, acknowledged.

Conclusion

In closing, there is no “other world” where the more-than-human realm is distinctly constituted nor where humans exist independently from more-than-human animals; rather, there is only *othering* and *silencing* in this world that hinders embodied, compassionate, informed, interconnectedness (Abram, 1996; Plumwood, 1993; Schutten & Rogers, 2011; XXX-1). Much of this othering and silencing is

constructed and reinforced communicatively, which is a primary reason why the discipline of communication must begin to include and welcome internatural phenomena and related theorizing. Failure to acknowledge internatural experiences, like CA bereavement, further perpetuates harmful and limiting binaries and ideologies that function to disenfranchise multispecies relationships and bonds, experiences, grief, and limit the reach of knowledge related to multispecies communication phenomena. To reiterate, I do not attempt, nor has it ever been an intention to criticize extant research in the communication discipline that is human-centric, as we have learned a great deal for such endeavors. Rather, my argument and advocacy center on the need for the “next step,” the need for research and theorization surrounding internatural phenomena and why/how this is important for our discipline and knowledge acquisition. However, I am also keenly aware that my argument severely challenges the dominant, Western master identity and ideology because it calls for innovation, reflection, acknowledging emotions, acknowledging our interconnectedness *with* more-than-human beings, and abandonment of our “deep desire to deny our existence as embodied beings,” in a world that is not entirely of our own making (Rogers, 1998, p. 255). By way of reflecting on my 9.5-year relationship with Fifi, I hope that I have illuminated the seriousness of multispecies relationships (to some people) and how the loss of these relationships can be devastating for the bereaved individual. The experience of bereavement is not made any easier in a society where multispecies relationships are largely seen as lesser-than solely because one of the relational partners is not human; thereby disenfranchising one’s grief and loss. It is time that these relationships are acknowledged, not just by society but also by the communication discipline. In doing this, a space for testing the veracity of our theories is cultivated as well as a space where (internatural) experiences are validated and oppressing binaries and hierarchical ideologies are challenged.



June 18, 2020

I didn’t make Fifi a birthday cake on what would have been her 10th birthday (06/15/2020). I feel guilty about that. For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. It was also my birthday, on the 15th, and it was a weird space to be in. I was sad since I also shared that day with Fifi for nine years. Making her a birthday cake was a tradition and I feel like I don’t want to break that tradition despite her not physically being with us. Tonight, I plan on making Addie and Molly [dogs]

a 'dog cake' in celebration of Fifi's birthday. Fifi was the most serious, intimate, long-term relationship that I had in my adult life. (Lenny is a close second, with 9 years in the books). I saw her every day for 9.5 years, from August 15, 2010, to January 3, 2020 (minus the occasional vacation, travel for work, etc.). She was my best friend, confidant, snuggle buddy, walking buddy, motivator, the person I rejoiced with when good things happened. To me, she was a teacher. The pain I felt when she died was (and still is) bone cutting. It cuts deeper than I can explain, but the feeling is consuming.



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