

Gratitude for our Ancestors
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Buster the Wonder Cat© by Allison King

I imagine that many, if not most of you, have had the experience of having a pet who just grabbed your heart. You had a connection that was special, that seemed a bit beyond the normal “if you feed me I’ll be nice to you,” relationship that can be had with some animals. A pet that did more than take up space on the furniture and shed everywhere and barf under the bed - a pet that was more of a companion, or even a partner.

I had such a pet once. This is Buster. I always called him Buster the Wonder Cat because he was funny, and smart, and athletic, and playful, and kind of magical. I got him from my sister when her pure-bred Tonkinese cat had an unauthorized mating with a neighborhood cat and produced this marvelous creature. I knew right away that he was my cat.

When I brought Buster home, I was living in San Francisco in an old Victorian house that had been converted to apartments, and my place had this long hallway with hardwood floors. The light in the hallway was perfect for making shadows on the wall at the end of the hall, and Buster would run down that hallway chasing those shadows, and then go splat on the wall as he would jump up and try to catch them. It was so funny that I just did it over and over and over.

Buster was a very talkative cat. I used to have an 8-5 job, and when I would leave in the morning, Buster would walk outside with me, and when I came back at the end of the day, he’d sitting be on the stoop waiting for me. We would walk in the apartment together, and he would just talk up a storm. (demonstrate). If I didn’t interject with “really? Wow, how about that? You don’t say?” or whatever, he would become visibly and audibly upset and scold me.

One evening, I went out with some friends and received a lot of compliments on what I was wearing. I said, “thank you, my cat dressed me.” They thought this was ridiculous, but it was true. I don’t know what got into me as I was getting ready that night, but Buster was just lying on the bed watching me, so I started showing him the clothes I was considering and would ask, “what do you think?” If he didn’t like it, he’d just turn his head away in disapproval. If he liked it, he nodded his head. So I put on everything that he liked, and got the most compliments on an outfit that I’ve ever had.

I lost Buster once. I used to keep my bedroom window open for him so that he could come and go, and he would regularly go in and out in the wee hours of the night. But one morning, he didn’t come home. I was really worried, because usually he never missed a meal. Day after day stretched on, and he didn’t come home. I went out every day searching for him, flyers on telephone poles, ads in the paper, you name it. He was missing for almost 2 months, and I had finally given up, when one morning, he crawled home and banged on the screen door to be let in. He was scrawny and covered with greasy dirt, and barely recognizable, but I identified him by a scar on his ear. I was never so happy to see anyone in my life. Fortunately, he made a complete recovery and lived a happy and healthy life for another 14 years.

Buster left me in February of 2011, at the age of 19 ½. It’s the price we pay when we have pets, dealing with that loss. I keep hoping that he’ll come back to me somehow, that the cosmic cat distribution system will figure out a way to bring him back. But there was only one of him, just as there is only ever

one of any of us, and like all of our beloved family members, we must treasure the time that we get with those in our lives.

I will always miss him.

Stuart and Grandpa Howlett© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

It is one of my great sadnesses that my husband, Stuart, never got to meet my mother's father, Grandpa Howlett. They crossed paths to be sure – Stuart entered my life as my grandfather left mine.

I met my husband, Stuart, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, while we were serving in the Peace Corps. We had dated only a few short months before the term of my service ended and I was to leave the country. Stuart had more than a year left of his service. Though I really liked this man, it didn't seem that we knew each other well enough to keep a romance going across the miles and time apart. We spent a few short days together right before I left the country, but as I remember it, we didn't make any plans for the future. It was one of those "wish-the-timing-were-better" romances and our final days together in Tegucigalpa seemed like one long goodbye. He saw me off at the airport – the Tegucigalpa airport is – or was in 1989 – pretty small – gates 1, 2 and 3, – and it wasn't until our airport goodbye, that I blurted out to him that I would be in Antigua, Guatemala for two weeks in June with my mother who would be studying Spanish – and that if he wanted to see me again, I knew I would be in that place at that time and that he was welcome to join us. I didn't really believe that he would meet me there, but I had to say it to him. I had to give him some indication that if at all possible, I'd like this relationship to continue, however unlikely it was.

So, I traveled with my Peace Corps friends around Central America – I shared a first class seat to Managua with my friend, Cydney, because they had overbooked the flight. We had many other adventures together, until finally, in June, we checked into a hotel in Antigua, Guatemala ready to make a run to the airport to pick up my mother for her two week intensive Spanish lessons. But when I called home, I learned that my grandfather was sick, was dying, and that my mother wasn't going to make it to Guatemala after all. I was so sad, and very torn.

If I returned home, I would miss the rest of my travels in Central America and surely wouldn't be able to afford to return for the wedding in Mexico City at the end of the month – my cousin was getting married and I really wanted to be there. I wanted to be in Washington with my family, but it was unlikely I would get to see my grandfather again even if I left immediately.

As I was deciding what to do, I learned that my grandfather had died. My mom suggested that I stay, so I stayed up late into the night telling my friend, Cydney, stories about my grandfather.

This is a photograph of my Grandpa Howlett, complete with cigar in his mouth - the two girls under the Christmas tree I think are my mom and sister.

The next morning, Cyd and I were having breakfast at Doña Luisa's – the cool health food restaurant with homemade yogurt and granola that exists only for the mostly European tourists in Antigua – and we ran into some other Peace Corps Volunteers on vacation from Honduras. They just happened to mention that another volunteer, Stuart, would also be arriving in Antigua sometime that day. Well, he did arrive, and after some amusing conversations with the hotel clerks inquiring after him – I couldn't remember how to say "bald" in Spanish- Stuart's most distinctive feature – *calvo* - he finally found me at Doña Luisa's later that day, and with the absence of my mother, we were able to create a healthy, lasting relationship from that blossoming romance. In many ways, I think the death of my grandfather made room for my eventual marriage to Stuart.

I told Stuart about Grandpa Howlett, and on the day of the funeral in Sedro Woolley, WA, Cydney, Stuart, and I went and bought lilies from the market, walked into the hills above Antigua, and held our own service in memory of my grandfather. Stuart sang. I remember placing lilies in cornstalks, and I talked about my grandfather being a farmer – he actually worked for Puget Power and Light most of his life, but he had the soul of a farmer.

As soon as he retired from Puget Power and Light, he spent a year or more working on a farm near Othello, Washington. I felt very close to my grandfather on that hill, knowing that the rest of my family was gathering in Washington to remember him together.

Grandpa Howlett and Stuart would have really enjoyed one another. Grandpa has often served as my bridge for understanding Stuart and his family of origin better. Grandpa Howlett was the only dog owner and hunter in my family. We had pheasant for Thanksgiving every year that Grandpa had shot. Stuart comes from a family of dog owners and hunters, and in his family as with Grandpa, this hunting was an expression of true appreciation for nature – they respected the wildlife and would never violate the strict regulations that serve to protect the populations of deer or pheasant or quail. Grandpa was a conservative Republican and Stuart comes from a family of political conservatives. I remember well trying to explain to my grandfather about my arrest at the Nevada Test Site in protest of underground nuclear testing....and Grandpa's subsequent defense of our use of nuclear bombs in WWII. Those conversations with my grandfather help me understand many a conversation with my in-laws today.

And I don't remember it well, but when I was very young, my grandfather played the fiddle. He was very musical. When my father's family gathered at the ocean, my two grandfathers would sing together in harmony, the way Stuart and my other grandpa did long after Grandpa Howlett's death.

Immediately after the Peace Corps, when Stuart was still in Honduras, I drove Grandpa's truck from Utah where I had left my stuff in my mother's house, to Pullman, WA where I was going to attend graduate school in education – and on that drive, Grandpa was so close I would talk to him in the cab of the truck.

I told him about Stuart and about Honduras and about my decision to become a teacher. It was as if he was sitting in that truck beside me. And though it's now been nearly 30 years since his death, I still feel his presence from time to time – especially, in the woods that he loved, or when I see a farm, or a truck like his, or hear one of the old songs he used to sing, or fiddle music. I wish Grandpa had lived long enough to meet our son, Theo, and our dog, Chestnut. He'd be really pleased that I have a dog now – and that I married a gardener who composts our food scraps as he did for years.

I believe that there is a connection between my dead grandfather and my living husband, Stuart. One left my life as the other entered it, they are alike in ways they never got to know but which delights me to this day, I love them both and they both loved me.

I enjoyed telling you this story. Why don't you find someone today and tell your story of someone you loved, even if that love was far more complicated than that between a granddaughter and her grandfather. Tell someone about that ancestor who has died but is still here – whose presence you still feel even though you can no longer hug them. If you're a parent, tell your children about an ancestor they never met but whose life has deeply affected their own.

May we remember them today, with love and joy and sadness – and invite them into the lives of others we love.