

The First Day of Fall and Already It Feels Like Winter

by
Tim Schnabel

On the afternoon of September 21, 1993 Tim and his cat, Chuck, spent time together on their back porch. As Tim read aloud this letter to his little friend he was already grieving. When Chuck's mom, Nancy, returned home from work, they took their beloved cat to their trusted veterinarian to be euthanized. Before sunset Chuck was buried in the wooded area behind their home, where for some 11 years he had gloriously roamed and hunted. This is the letter:

Dear Chuck,

I am off balance with how much sadness I am experiencing with the rapid decline in your health and what now appears to be your virtual blindness. As I watch you tentatively and gingerly make your way about, obviously in pain, I feel so helpless. Dr. Bill has told me we have done all we can do. You are now seriously ill and your mother and I have decided to end your life. I feel quite fragile in telling you this.

Part of my grief deals with the way you were - perky, quick, occasionally feisty and always clever. Another part of my sadness deals with what I have discovered about myself, as you have been a mirror for me. That part has to do with forgiving myself for my lack of tolerance. In growing to love you, I have increased my capacity for patience, as well as expanded my forbearance for diversity. Where once I thought you weird, I now recognize and appreciate how you are different. Where once I found you unattractive, I now claim your beauty. Where once I called you aloof, I have come to value your independence. I am sorry I was harsh with my earlier judgements.

Our relationship began when you came with the package by virtue of my falling in love and marrying your attractive two-legged mother. You were simply a step-pet. While you and I have grown comfortable together, we have had a challenging relationship. It was sure rocky in the beginning, wasn't it? However, I have come to both enjoy and deeply respect you. To be honest, Chuck, I have taken pride in being one of your companions. Being buddies was a stretch for both of us. We have come a long way together.

Before I met your mother you had already been displaced to the elements because, as part of your deteriorating house manners from a serious virus, you had begun using the living room carpet for your litter box. You endured freezing temperatures with a heating pad in the garage, intensely hot and humid days under the rear deck and braved wind, rain, sleet and snow. When we were not at home, you hid under the hollow in the driveway whenever the skies flashed and the heavens roared.

I recall a cold winter morning a few years ago when I was leaving for my office. As I opened the door to the garage you bounded in, looking determined to claim your old home inside again. My feeble attempts to coax you to the outdoors failed. You actually sat down, turning your back on me. In desperation I regressed to an outdated and

ineffective strategy modeled for me by lumbering giants early in my life. As I launched into my “yell and command” mode, you ran upstairs where you had not been in years, quickly (and wisely) hiding under a bed. Not knowing your whereabouts I raced around the house like a fool, trying to capture you. Doing so I thought to myself, “How dare you cause me to be late, idiot cat! How dare you inconvenience me, you recalcitrant!” Somewhere in the midst of my futility I remembered your mother’s voice when she had witnessed me playing the fool. It was a calm voice, with a pleasant tone that sounded excited instead of angry. Boy, did I make a shift! Taking a few deep breaths and continuing to walk from room to room, I began anew with a calm tone, speaking to you softly, “This isn’t working Chuck. I know you would like to stay in the house, but it’s not possible. Yes, I was mad, but I am over it now and I would never hurt you. I am late leaving, and if you are scared, I am sorry. Come on Chucky, kitty, please come out. I’ve got some milk for you.”

After a few minutes of talking and walking from room to room, I saw the skirt on one of the beds move. Getting down on all fours, I cautiously peeked underneath. There we were eye to eye, both somewhat startled by our immediate and unexpected closeness. Your pretty eyes were bright, yet conveyed uncertainty. Tears were already running from mine, letting out remorse. “I never meant for you to be terrified, Chuck,” I said quietly as you let me carefully remove you from your sanctuary. I kept my part of the bargain and you got your milk—you even purred. Yes, I was late, but this is what I remember, not what happened when I arrived at my office with clients waiting. Remember when you disappeared for almost two weeks a few of years ago? I initially and secretly felt some strange sense of satisfaction. However, with each passing day I found myself missing you more and more. I wondered if you were alive and if so, might you be in pain? When you suddenly and inexplicably appeared, dirty, thin and hungry, I was filled with joy and relief, only too eager to fill and re-fill your food bowl. You were a champion in my eyes and deserved a hero’s welcome! You got one and from then on you remained one of my heroes. We were different with each other after that, weren’t we?

You have survived, my friend, and it has come down to this. Now you are dying. More than likely you will be totally and irreversibly blind in a matter of days. Often, you seem in pain. You hardly eat, seldom wash or groom yourself any more, and sleep most of the time. Neither our vet nor the eye specialist sounds optimistic. Yes, you could live longer, but there is little doubt about the profoundly diminished quality of your life, compounded with your increasing vulnerability to neighborhood animals and machines. Because you are a survivor, my little friend, I am certain this is one of the reasons I feel a bond with you. We have been fellow sojourners. We know what it’s like to come through the cold and dark nights. We’ve gone from surviving to thriving. Only now you are not at all thriving and I am losing you.

You were a fine hunter, Chuck B moles, birds, chipmunks and occasional squirrels. Thanks for the many gifts you left on our doorstep. I have been proud of you for many things, and hunting was only one. You became highly skilled at street crossings, and outlasted neighborhood animals bullying you B while relishing your Yorkie buddy, Bucky, coming to your rescue. Old outdoors warrior of five years, are you letting us

know this oppressive summer heat has been too much or that you do not wish to do another winter?

I do not want to come home to find you run over by a car or dead in the woods, or not find you at all. We are going to take you to Dr. Bill who, in a few hours, will give you an injection which will end your life. I am told it is painless, and Dr. Bill is a compassionate man. I will be with you, old buddy. Then your mother and I will bury you in the back yard with your first dog pal, Elsa, and your mother's other beloved pets.

As I enter the autumn of this year I will be keenly aware of your absence and on the days to follow this painful time, I shall miss you most walking out the driveway after me as I fetch the morning paper. There we were, two sensitive and caring guys, greeting each other and the day. Soon to be alone on this morning ritual, I shall continue to greet each day and smile through my tears as I think of you.

On the first day of fall in the years to come, while I imagine I might still feel momentary sadness, I think what I will feel mostly is a combination of joy and celebration. Yes, Chuck, I will celebrate that you were in my life and you were an unexpected teacher for me. The Navajo say it is important to bless those who challenge us to grow, to stretch and to move beyond the knowable, and for us, to come back home to our elemental and essential nature. You sure did this for me, ole buddy and on anniversaries of this time to come, I will remember how humbling you and your gift have been.

So, Chuck, with the advent of each new fall and the anniversary of you leaving this earthly life, I will offer a prayer of gratitude your way and feel ever so blessed that you were in my life.

If forgiveness is required then I ask you to forgive me for my part in the decision to end your life. Your mother and I approach this task with the utmost respect and dignity for you. One of the notes from an earlier vet visit stated, "bad cat." I disagree. While you may have been timid, scared and not terribly affectionate, you were not bad. I am surprised at how much you have added to my days and am grateful that you took your place with us on this earth.

Thank you for your trust, Chuck. In your willingness to grant me your confidence I had unwittingly come to love you. Both took time. Both were indeed worth the journey for me. So the decision to end your life is both painful and difficult for me. I wish you an ending of ease, with a minimum of scare and discomfort B finding peace eternal, beyond. Thanks for being one of my teachers, and especially, being for my buddy.

I love you, Chuck.

Tim Schnabel, M.Ed. is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, grief counselor, Certified Transactional Analyst and cultural assessment specialist in clinical and organizational practice. He lives in Lilburn, Georgia. Tim sees folks individually, as couples, in families and as part of organizations. He consults and does training nationally. Like author and animal lover, Susan Chernak McElroy, he shares the belief that those who live most fully and joyfully, also know how to grieve. Tim is listed in the APLB directory of pet bereavement counselors.