

2nd Opinion: The great passage of Genevieve

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Gracefully, Genevieve put her head down on the pillow, took a few gentle breaths, and then she was gone.

Her spirit had moved on—passing through the veil to the eternal place where, I believe, a communion of saints joyfully awaited her arrival.

I felt her leave—something I'd never experienced before, despite having lost many people dear to me over the years. I had never been there for the moment where life moves into death and the spirit departs.

Bearing witness to her home-going was profoundly sacred. I felt honored to be with her in that holy place, to tell her how much we loved her and how much joy she had brought to all who knew her, to tell her not to worry and that it was OK to go to the place where the pain would be gone and she could run and swim and play again.

“Say hi to everybody for us,” I whispered. “We love you.”

Sitting next to Genevieve's great pillow, each with a hand on her body, one of us offered a spontaneous prayer thanking the Creator for making such a marvelously sweet, patient and loyal friend and for blessing our lives with her company.

A more holy moment I've scarcely felt in my life.

She was about 10 years old when she passed this summer.

A beautiful blonde with huge, soulful brown eyes, she was a consummate swimmer—taking daily dips in the ocean near her home. How appropriate

her name means “white wave.” Surely she was a white wave of devotion, a constant companion and loving guardian to her adoptive family of four.

Genevieve also was a dog, a golden Labrador.

As I reflected on what transpired in the moments before and after her death, Genevieve seemed like so much more than “just” a dog. She was, like her eyes, soulful. C.S. Lewis pondered aloud about such “soulful” creatures and whether they, like us, live on in the hereafter.

Genevieve wasn’t my dog. She belonged to dear friends. Sadly, when G—as she was known—fell ill, her family was out of the country and couldn’t make it back in time.

It was an honor to be with G at the end. I felt I was standing in proxy for her family, who couldn’t be there physically but who were praying for her from so many miles away.

“There is no distance in the spirit,” I thought, stroking G’s thick, butterscotch-colored coat. “They’re here, too.”

It feels crass to refer to such soulful animals as “pets” and their families as “masters.” No wonder St. Francis of Assisi referred to animals as his “sisters and brothers.”

Some of the more jaded or stuffy among us might find it absurd to talk about the death of a dog in such sacred terms. But I was there; I know what happened.

God was in that room, too. God’s spirit gave that dog life, and when it was time to move on to her eternal rest, the spirit left G’s body and she—the essential thing that made Genevieve herself—was gone. I call that her spirit.

Do dogs go to heaven? When my 10-year-old son asked me that earlier this

week, I said yes. Despite a general uneasiness around dogs, especially big dogs, my son just loved G. She was special. Careful. Grace-filled.

I love the answer Billy Graham gave when asked a similar question about dogs and the hereafter some years ago: “God will prepare everything for our perfect happiness in heaven, and if it takes my dog being there, I believe he’ll be there.”

Do animals have spirits that live on after death, like humans do? I think so, yes. Jesus came to redeem the world entire—and that, in my mind, means everybody and every thing. So why not the four-legged creations sent as our companions?

Even Martin Luther seemed to think so, and I’m not going to argue theology with the father of the Reformation.

“Be thou comforted, little dog,” Luther said. “Thou too in resurrection shall have a little golden tail.”

Amen.

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