

Ode to Niki and Her Natural Passing

By Lisa Ross-Williams

Twenty years. Two decades, almost, to the day she arrived, our senior cat Niki honored us with a natural passing at home. This article is two-fold; to tell the story of her amazing life and to share the gift of her allowing us to be involved with her final stage of life.

It was early in the year 1988 and I had just arrived at Wright Patterson Air Force Base coming from Madrid, Spain. It was just myself and Sasha, a cat I brought back from Spain, in a tiny apartment. Someone's cat had kittens four weeks prior and out of the litter was one Siamese...how could I resist? Little did I know this tiny being, who hid behind the refrigerator for two days, would share a large portion of my life.

Soon after, Kenny (who would later become my husband) entered our lives. It's funny to think that I had Niki before I had Kenny! Throughout the next three years, we lived the military life of moving from home to home, often having roommates and many, many parties. Niki became quite the social butterfly.

In 1991, we moved to Arizona after leaving the military and started to slowly add more animals into our life. Throughout the next 17 years, Niki helped raise six dogs and four cats, seeing three of the dogs pass. She also moved with us four times, each time helping the other family animals become accustomed to their new homes.



Niki in her youth

As she aged, she no longer enjoyed hunting birds (which we never approved of but understood the feline instinct). However, she then found a new prey, pens, which she would stalk as they lay on my desk, then carry them out to me, howling all the way.

As with all creatures, age begins to take its toll and although she never had any physical issues, her muscle mass began to decrease and she slept many more hours of the day. She did get a little senile and often seemed confused, but she was always happy, very vocal and physically in good health. We just knew she was waiting on the last move,

which finally came to realization with our finding our ranch in Cornville, Arizona.

Although the trip was only 2.5 hours away by car, the other four cats acted as though the world was coming to an end. But Niki knew...this was her last move and it was her responsibility to help. Upon arrival at our new home, while the other cats hid in the bedroom closet, Niki explored the 4000-square-foot house. She soon found the premium spot right next to the wood pellet stove. It was truly heaven for her.

The Final Days

We had been in our new place for about a month and Niki was sleeping more and more. We felt her time in her physical body was soon coming to an end. She had some bloodwork done in the Summer of 2007 which revealed she was doing great for her age, but as with all senior animals, her kidney function was decreasing. Dr Burke couldn't believe this was the only issue that showed up. One day, she started running and playing as though she was a kitten again—one last hurrah. But that evening she did not eat, which was very strange as she loved her groceries. Having gone through the natural dying process with one of our dogs, I figured she was preparing. It's very common for animals (and humans) to stop eating right before their death. Three days passed with her refusing food, and sleeping more and more, so we knew the time was close.

Honoring the Passage

By Ella Bittel

Little do we understand about death's mysteries and for us humans it seems second nature to be afraid of dying. We want to protect our loved ones from having to experience what we are afraid of, often overlooking that animals are by far less prone to fear and resistance of the changes that occur during a natural dying process.



After having enjoyed a long, healthy and full life, senior Siamese Niki beautifully shows us it can be mastered, this transition from life in a body to the non-physical realm. It entails

some work, but so does being born and living on planet earth - and all of it can be worth it.

When its physical life comes to an end, for an animal to fully participate in its own process of saying goodbye to what was, and getting ready for what is next, it takes its humans to allow it to happen. Sensing opportunity and significance that is inherent in nature's way of bringing closure, and their ability to recognize that Niki herself was in acceptance of what was happening, gave Lisa and Kenny the strength to support her all the way.

Blessed travels indeed, Niki!



Niki enjoying her final days, by the fire with Keiko

Her hind end started to become weak and she often seemed very confused when she awoke. Some say that the animals are checking out the other side while asleep and are surprised when they come back to the physical realm. Although I understood the process, my logical mind started to question whether I should do something... Thankfully, a call to holistic vet, Ella Bittel (www.spiritsintransition.com), who specializes in animal hospice, helped us understand that questioning ourselves was a natural part of the process for us logical humans. She felt Niki was on track with a natural passing and there was no need to help her.

As the stages went on, we got the message Niki needed to be in a quieter area of the house and so we moved her to the bath-

room closet where she felt more comfortable. Knowing the end was getting close, we spent much time sitting with her, reliving all the great memories we had together over the last 20 years.


That evening at 5 pm, Kenny yelled for me. Niki had started the final process which began with a meow and continued with some labored breathing. Just prior to this, her extremities (ears, tail and feet) began to get cold. Although the physical aspect of this stage is hard on the human to watch, Niki seemed very much at ease. Although there may have been some discomfort as her body started to shut down, she was not in any obvious pain.

After a few gasps, she took one final long

breath and we felt her spirit leave. After a few minutes, we checked her with a stethoscope to ensure her body had indeed come to pass. As we always do when an animal family member passes, each of the dogs and cats were allowed to smell her body to have closure for themselves.

What was very interesting was that no cat lay in Niki's spot by the pellet stove for a week. Our cat Sage even hissed when passing that spot for three days after—perhaps Niki's presence was still there.

Although it was a shock to no longer have this amazing cat with us in the physical sense (I kept getting out her food dish for a week after), we focused on the great memories of the last 20 years. By sharing this story, I hope it allows others to experience a natural passing with their animal friend if possible.

Note: Although a natural death is possible for many animals, those who are in pain and not able to pass themselves (for instance, not mentally ready to leave the physical world or perhaps kept going by conventional drugs when they shouldn't be), the option of help through euthanasia is quite acceptable. 

About the author:

Lisa Ross-Williams is a natural horse care consultant and host of the If Your Horse Could Talk show which promotes natural horse care through knowledge. She is also the Associate Editor of Natural Horse Magazine. She lives with her husband Kenny and a menagerie of animals on Talking Horse Ranch Educational Center in Cornville, Arizona. www.natural-horsetalk.com



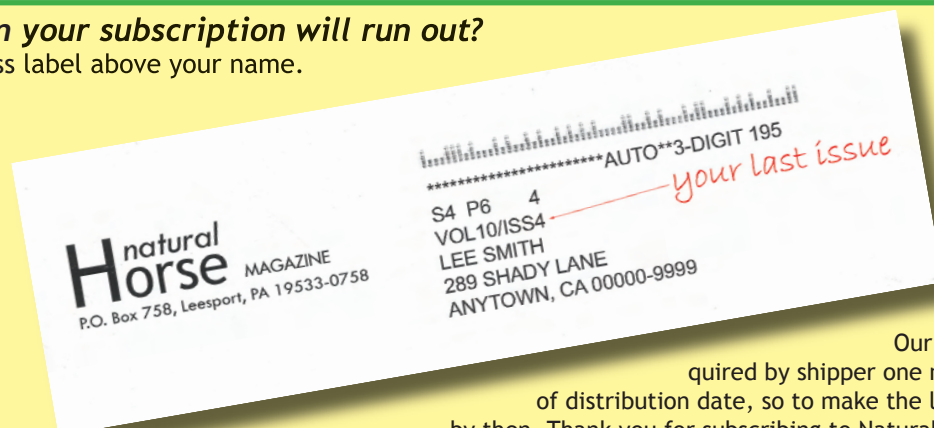
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