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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



Joey's gift

I've had four cats in my adult life. The oldest, Mimi, a black and white kitty, lived 21 years before she passed away. I joke she was old enough to graduate from college if she had been human. Her daughter, Mojo, was 17 and died before Mimi. When my husband and I adopted two twin tabby cats, Joey and Kiki, 12 years ago, we thought we wouldn't have to worry about their health for many more years.

In my July column, I wrote about Joey having stomach problems, but that he had begun to get better. The day after I wrote the piece, Joey had a stroke and was paralyzed on one side. The vet thought he might live only another 72 hours. We grieved and waited for any signs of recovery. We had to feed him baby food and his medicine through a syringe. His sister just sniffed at him and walked away. Animals have a more practical way of dealing with illness.

Joey was always more puppy than kitty. He followed me wherever I went. He always greeted us when we got home by sitting a few feet from the door and meowing at us. He would fetch earplugs or string, and we played hide-and-seek throughout the house. If he was in another room, I'd just call out "Where's Joey? Where'd he go?" He would find me, sit down just out of arm's reach, and look at me. Then I'd say, "There's Joey!" Though he enjoyed hanging out with us, he didn't care much about being petted or brushed. Playing and eating were his passions. I often referred to him as a techno-kitty because he loved technology. He'd run to the phone when it rang and try to bite it. He rushed to investigate the vacuum cleaner, more fascinated than afraid. And he always posed for "selfies" on my iPhone.

When Richard and I brought Joey home from the vet, he was still paralyzed on the right side. After three days and much weeping, I tried to make peace with saying goodbye. The night before we were going to call the vet to euthanize him, I said to Joey: "If you want to let go, we'll help you. If you want to stay, then show me a sign — any sign."

The next day, he ate food from a spoon then crawled to the nearby litterbox on his own. For two-and-a-half weeks, he appeared to be on the road to recovery. He ate voraciously with no help, took to residing in a cardboard box we called his "kitty condo," and was able to walk to the litterbox. He wasn't paralyzed anymore; the vet was amazed when I told her. We thought it was a little miracle.



Joey (2004-2016) acted more like a puppy than a kitty. In this photo, his reflection is seen through a window looking outside at a power pole.

Then in late July, Joey stopped using his litterbox and couldn't walk. He crawled, became incontinent, and was losing his spirit. The only joy he had was eating; each day we cleaned up his messes. He barely moved. A few times, we found him in a corner of the kitchen, perhaps trying to find a place to die. It was not kind of life for him, one I wouldn't want for myself. We then made the tough decision so many people face.

In early August, our vet made a house call. Joey went painlessly and quickly. The vet technician who arrived with Dr. Carr took a paw print of Joey in clay so we could remember him. Richard built a casket for Joey and we laid him to rest in our backyard.

I know he was just a cat. And I know the world has much to grieve right now with human atrocities and violence undeserved. Somehow, though, the unconditional love we receive from our pets reminds us to be human and have more compassion for others.

Joey gave us many gifts. In his prime, he brought us joy; in his decline, he brought Richard and me closer, reaffirming our love. This experience led us to real talks about aging and coping with the loss of friends, or each other.

I'd thought I was better prepared to lose Joey, but I guess one is never fully ready. At least I had an extra three weeks with him after his stroke. I've noticed that the older I become, grieving is not just for the one loss, but also every previous loss. Grief compounds. However, there's a greater legacy to remember, which is how we all live on. In memory.

Be at peace my baby boy, my buddy, my friend, my Joey.

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Wondering what events are going on this week?

Check out *The Asian Reporter's* Community and A.C.E. Calendar sections, on pages 10 and 12.