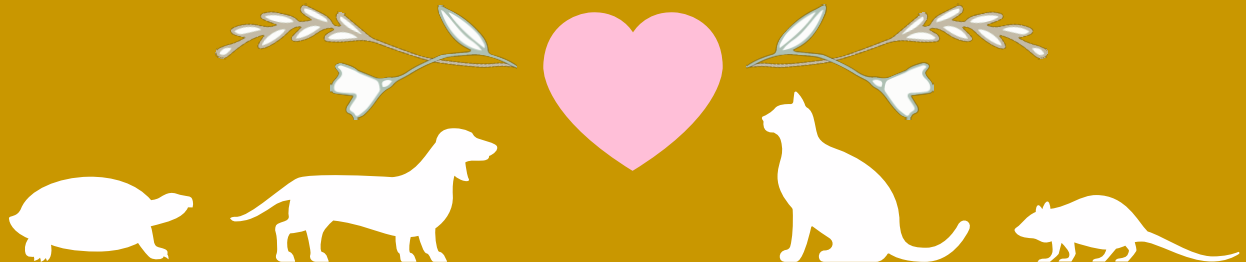


# TOPICS IN DEATH EDUCATION

# HOME FUNERALS

# FOR PETS



## WHY HAVE A HOME FUNERAL FOR A PET?

Deciding to have a home funeral and burial for your pet is an entirely personal choice, and there is no one right direction for each person. A home funeral is the best choice when a family or individual wants to focus on processing the loss and grief emotionally and spend little or no money. Taking care of your pet's body at home can:

**Allow the work of processing loss to happen on your timeline.** You control how long your family sees the body, how long the funeral lasts, and can adjust based on when everyone is ready. In other situations, you may only have a few moments with a pet's body before it's taken away, and you may not be present at all.

**Help children understand death.** Often pets pass away in a vet's office, and children may only briefly see the pet or not see the pet's body at all. Death becomes something vague, where the body disappears. Pet death is often the first death children experience in life. Allowing them to ask questions and process it fully can help them figure out what "dead" means — that it is not sleeping, and it is not disappearing.

**Help you grieve better.** There's nothing wrong with cremation itself, but when a pet dies and is immediately cremated with no ceremony, there is no story through which we can cognitively stitch together this big transition: death itself may happen quickly, but our acceptance and coping does not.

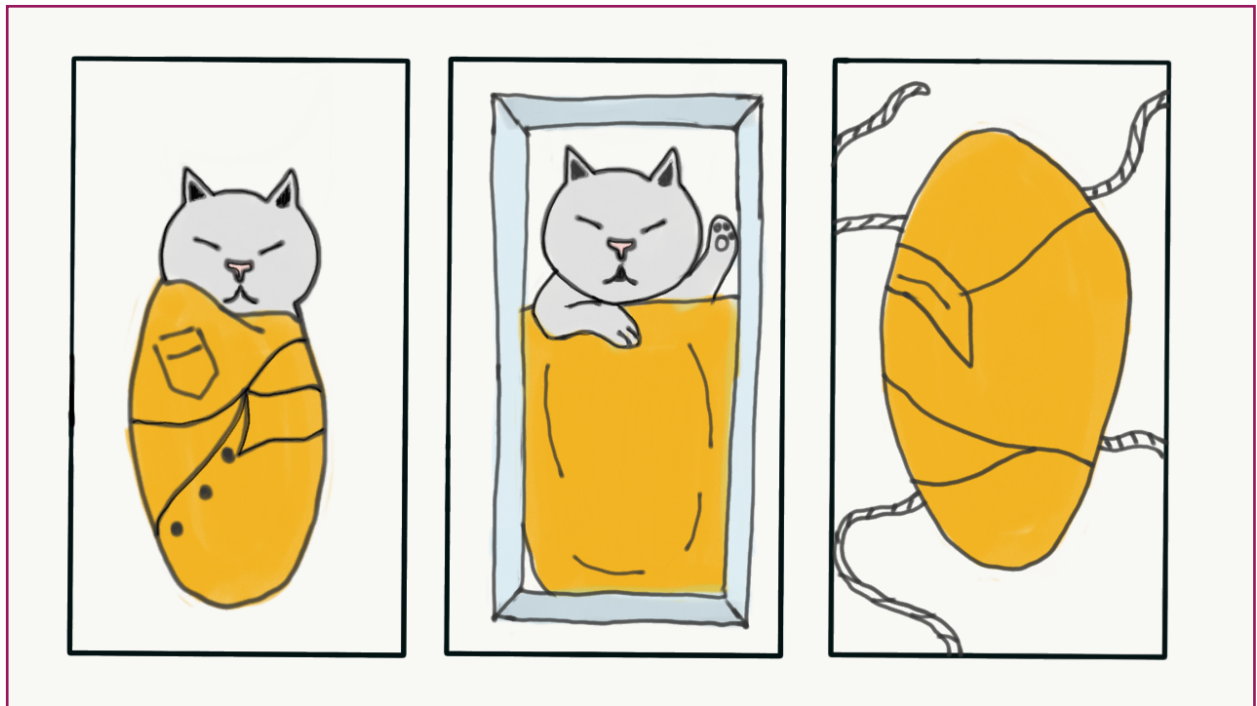




**Plan your timeline.** First, determine when you will carry out each stage of the process, keeping in mind that you probably want an uncooled pet to be buried within 24-36 hours. If there are people you'd like present, pick a time for the ceremony and burial that allows plenty of time for the other tasks, as well as rest and care for your family, then contact those folks to invite them to attend.

**Choose a covering.** How would you like your pet's body to go into the grave? You may choose to wrap them in one of your old shirts, their favorite blanket, or any sheet or material. *Any type of fabric can function as a **shroud**.* The other option would be to put them in a box of some type, and *any rigid container can function as a **casket**.*

Either option is fine and the choice is based on personal preferences. Caskets do usually require larger graves be dug, so keep that in mind. On the plus side, they can allow for decoration as well — art can be glued, painted directly on, decoupage.



You may put ropes under the pet's shroud for lowering it into the grave (far right) in order to avoid deep bends and heavy lifting.



### 3. Gather materials and supplies.

**Ceremonial needs.** Candles and jars or lanterns, incense, small fire pits, and matches are all opportunities for folks to focus on a quiet visual element while experiencing their own feelings. Music is easily streamed via any speaker and phone or other devices. If it is cold outside, grab blankets for folks.

**Tribute items.** These should be things that your friends or family can drop into the grave with the pet's body, sort of offerings of your love or memories of them.

*Favorite toys, treats, food items chews.*

*Collars, leashes, clothes, snuggle items.*

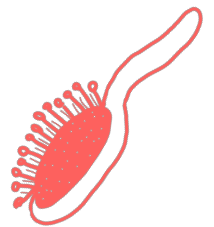
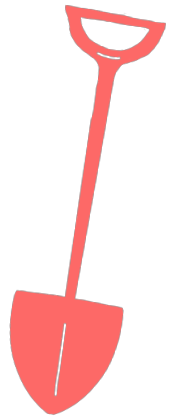
*Art or notes that the family makes for the pet.*

**Art supplies.** Pen, markers or crayons, paper, and scissors allow folks to write notes or thoughts about the pet, which may be more comfortable than saying them aloud. Kids and anyone who is challenged with verbal expression can benefit from finding other ways to articulate loss.

**Garden tools.** Locate or borrow long-handled (1) *shovels*. One is fine, more if you have helpers. Gather some (2) *outdoor materials that are heavy enough to keep animals out* — rocks, stepping stones, pavers, bricks, or heavy pieces of wood to put on top of the grave. (3) *Garden shears, snippers or heavy-duty kitchen scissors* will work for cutting greenery.

**Optionally, gather grooming tools and products** if you want to tidy your pet up beforehand. This isn't necessary, but may be desirable if the pet was ill or wounded, or if grooming was a loving act during the pet's life. Wipes or wet washcloth, a comb or brush, a collar or neckerchief — choose whatever you would have used normally.

**Absorbent materials** like a diaper, pads, cleaning cloths, old towels will do for putting under your pet's body to catch waste that may be released as the muscles relax.



# Exposing Children to Death

What is helpful for a child, and what will be traumatic for them to see? What is too hard or too sad? Families worry a lot about “getting it right.” Across child development experts and veterinarians who work with families daily, there are some agreed upon tenants to good death education.

1. **Death is part of the lifecycle.** Study the science and lifecycles of different creatures in your family — frogs, gnats, whales, barrel sponges. Some live for mere days and others for centuries. Show that death in the animal kingdom is part of the food chain; watch food decomposition time-lapse videos so children understand the concept. Lastly, help them see the give-and-take relationship between death and birth.
2. **What weirds you out may not bother them.** Tongue hanging out? Your kid may just see that factually. Adults have a lifetime of associations to attach, and we tend to project them on children when we gauge what will be disturbing to them.
3. **Don't confuse death with sleep.** Your dog isn't “being put to sleep.” Death isn't a long sleep. You don't want your child to think that going to sleep at night is connected with dying. Teach your child about the vital organs and how to detect their own heartbeat and breath. Show them a time-lapse of a tree or flower through the seasons, using all its energy then wilting. Explain that all living things are similar.
4. **Teach, ask, and respect.** Teach your young child the basic concepts, preparing them for what they might see or feel. Then ask them if they want to be involved or not. Respect their answers, letting them navigate this with your guidance.

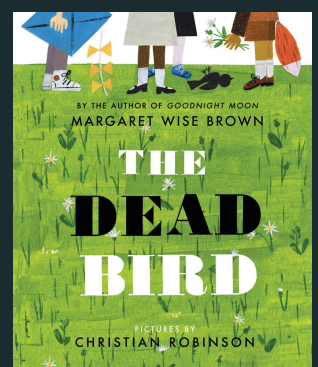
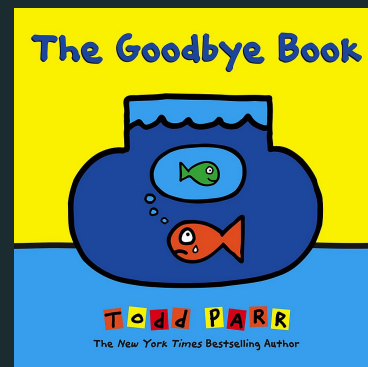
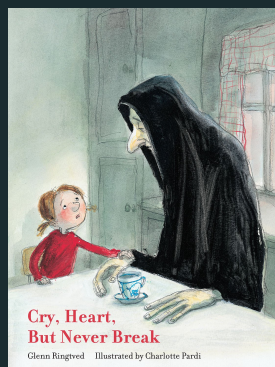
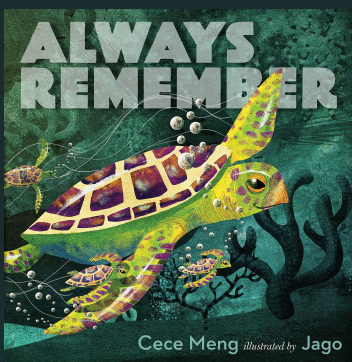


*Always Remember*  
Cece Meng

*Cry, Heart, But Never Break*,  
Glen Ringved

*The Goodbye Book*,  
Todd Parr

*The Dead Bird*,  
Christian Robinson







## Positioning

Once your pet dies, you have a few hours before the muscles become stiff. This may not matter to you, but depending on how your pet has died, you may want to adjust their position to make them easier to move, easier to fit in the grave, or more natural and comfortable appearing for family members.

- Tuck legs in closely around the body or fold feet in, just as the pet would naturally at rest.
- Bring the head in toward the body in a natural curve.



## Temperature

Once your pet has died, you will have approximately 24-36 hours until the body begins to decompose in a way that may produce a smell, assuming the home is air conditioned or temperatures are within the range of comfort for most humans. If it is especially warm, you may want to cool the body by placing reusable ice packs under it.

## Moving Larger Pets

If you have a dog or other large pet, consider using something rigid under them to make it easier to move them from one area to another. This is traditionally called a “shrouding board,” and an internet search will turn up examples of what that looks like. This won’t be buried with your pet and can be a sled, piece of plywood, or anything you have available.

## Waste Release

Most animals and humans will release some waste from their bladder and rectum in the hours after death as muscles relax. This is not a big deal. You can prepare by placing something absorbent or disposable under the pet.

## Cleaning and Grooming

Your pet is fine to be buried as is, so this step is for those who find closure in tending their pet’s body one last time. Clean your pet with wipes or a wet washcloth, combs or brushes. Bandage any wounds as you would in life.





## Location

Picking a place to bury a pet can take into consideration a lot of sentimental factors as well as practical logistics. You'll know spots that might be lovely or meaningful around your home. Also consider whether the area gets a lot of traffic, water, sun, and factors like that.

If friends have asked how they can help, digging a grave is a great task to give them.

- The natural breakdown that occurs with burial happens faster when when **the location isn't too wet** (so not at the bottom of a slope) **and has sun** (so not the shady back corner of a yard).
- Graves should be positioned where they **won't experience foot or recreational traffic**. The grave will have a mound on it immediately after burial, which isn't compatible with walkers or wheels.

## Size and Depth

While there is a lot of conflicting advice on depth, you want to be certain that the top of your pet's body has at least 18 inches of soil above it *at a minimum*. Depending on whether you'll be burying your pet in a shroud or casket, many folks say to dig a grave that is 3 feet deep. However, where you live, your physical ability, and what soil type you have all factor in as well. Going extra deep will also make the natural breakdown slower, as there will be less warmth from the sun.

**Dirt shifts.** When you've completely covered the grave, know that the grave will collapse a little over the coming months. For this reason, **you want to pile the soil up higher the ground around it so that there is a mound of soil on the grave.** As water and air shift, it will flatten with time.

## Surface Protections

Adding any type of heavy material to the top of the grave will discourage nighttime animals from disturbing the soil. Depending on where you live, this may not be necessary but adds a sense of security and can usually be done at no cost. You can use large pieces of wood, stones, bricks, pavers — it doesn't have to be anything specific or elaborate to be more of a deterrent than freshly moved soil.



A grave with no covering.

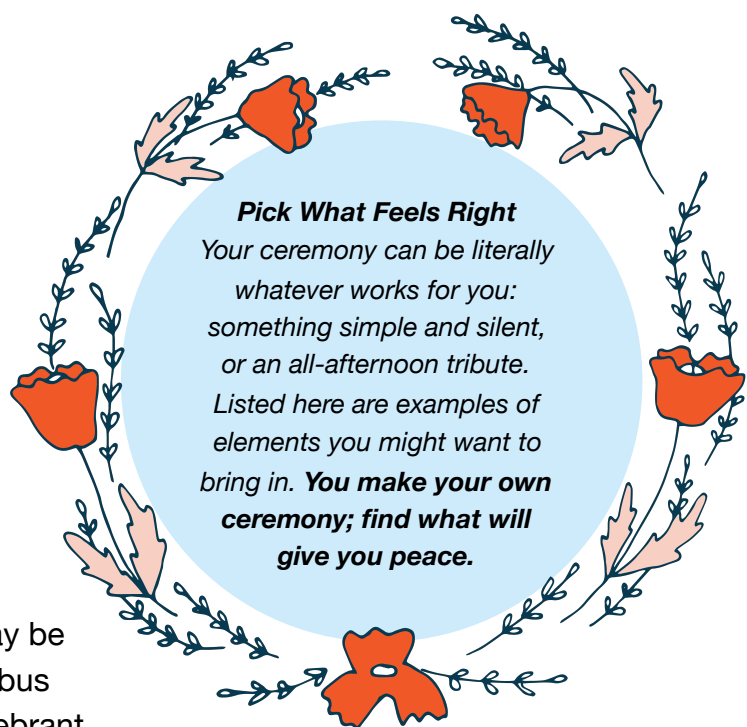
A covering of simple wood scraps.



Concrete pavers for covering.

## Elements of Ceremony

**Celebrant or Organizer:** When feasible, consider letting someone else lead the ceremony for you. An organizer would take charge inviting any additional attendees, gathering needed materials, and seeing that the grave is prepared. A celebrant would focus only on leading the ceremony, which is helpful for those who don't like speaking vulnerably in front of others. You can ask a friend or family member to do this, or there may be people in your community who do this. Columbus Community Deathcare is happy to provide celebrant services.



**Vigil:** When the body or container is displayed in the home for a period before burial, people may drop by or view the body to aid in processing the death.

**Adornment:** Once the pet's body has been wrapped in a shroud or placed in a box, add leaves, flower petals, beloved trinkets or small toys, treats, or anything that feels nurturing. These can be laid on top of or beside the pet, or tucked around.

**Fire:** Whether it's candles, incense, a fire pit for keeping warm in the winter — elements of fire are often incorporated into ceremonies around death. They symbolize endings and provide a grounding visual for focus and meditation.

**Music:** Calming music can be streamed from whatever device one has on hand. Live music, of course, is an option if you have the talent around. If children are present, ask if they would like to make a song for the pet.

**Captured feelings:** Any type of paper, pens, markers, or crayons will allow folks of any age the opportunity to put their feelings down, whether in words or art. These can then go into the grave as tributes. Allow this to happen throughout the day or while other things are also being done.



*In this picture, a child drew herself with a friend's cat that died and wrote the words, "What could I do without you?" All art went into the cat's grave.*



## ... Ceremony Planning

**Addition of Tributes:** Once the body has been lowered into the grave, add any last tributes to the pet — greenery collected from around the yard or any nearby areas is traditional, to symbolize the reunion with nature. Folks may also add their art or notes, or any other objects they wish to keep with the pet's body.

**Retrospects and Blessings:** In this familiar ritual, each person in the group shares what they were fondest of about the pet, perhaps a memory or a quality, or something they appreciated. After sharing whatever experience or reminiscences they want to contribute, they then speak a blessing or a truth for the pet now that it is has died. An example:

*(retrospect)* Aggie was always so gentle with kids. I loved that about him. He was so kind with any child, no matter how new or loud. He felt like an old soul. It made me trust and love him immediately.

*(blessing)* Aggie has had such a long life, and now I know he'll rest right here in his backyard, where he had so many good days. This is the ending he would want. I love him and I'll miss him, but he's at peace.

**Closing the Grave:** Allow turns for adding the soil to the grave. Each person may take one turn, or the group may take turns for as long as they like. This process can be very meaningful, as you are returning your pet to the earth.



*Above: Tribute greenery is added to the grave.*

*Below: A child takes a turn adding soil to the grave.*







p: 614-531-3044

## *How Can We Help?*

First and foremost, we want to stress that our primary goal is to **empower people to practice do-it-yourself deathcare at little or no cost within your own families and communities**. Community-based deathcare aims to bring funerals back to their roots and ensure that grieving families aren't exploited by the funeral industries that charge inflated prices and push unnecessary services.

Sometimes folks want additional support. In those cases, these are the services we can offer at this time.

### **Vigil Preparation | \$100**

**We prepare the body and setup the viewing in your home.**

- Pet's body is tidied up and setup for viewing in your home. Pet may be wrapped in shroud or not — your choice.
- Space around pet will be setup for viewing with tablecloth or pillows, depending on furniture.
- Candles and small floral arrangements are placed. Paper and pens for captured feelings and grave tributes are provided as well.

### **Graveside Ceremony and Grave Closure | \$100**

**You prepare the body and we lead the ceremony & grave closure.**

- Celebrant begins by consulting with the family about their beliefs and what they would like the ceremony.
- The ceremony is scheduled and the celebrant leads all attendees in a ceremony honoring the pet, including a variety of elements from our Elements of Ceremony section.
- Everyone is then invited to help close the grave, and the celebrant ensures that the grave is closed properly.

# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Created by Tara Koger, December 2019.

Co-owned by Columbus Community Deathcare and founder Donna Baker.



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