



Getting Religion

The death of a pet offers the perfect moment to reflect on heaven

By Kelli Wheeler

OK, I'm going to lay it all on the table right now. I'll admit we are not a regular churchgoing family. In fact, why don't we just remove the word "regular." My husband and I were both raised Catholic—we have the guilt, but not necessarily the church time, under our belts.

It's not that we're not a spiritual family. I have my direct line to God dialed up, every night thanking Him for my happy, healthy, safe-from-harm family. Oh, yes, and I pray that I will try to be more patient tomorrow and give another shot at going a day without raising my voice. Well, OK, running to shut the windows so the neighbors don't hear me yelling at my kids.

Actually, my husband and I have had discussions about how to introduce faith and spirituality into our home. It is an important value for us, and we feel strongly that, with or without church, our children will have a solid yet fluid belief basis. We decided we would roll with the punches and introduce such intangible concepts as God, heaven and spirit in small, age-appropriate doses as they presented themselves.

It started off pretty easy. At Thanksgiving, we would talk about being thankful for our gifts in life, including our gifts from God. My 4-year-old daughter, our more spiritual child, initially challenged us with some very thoughtful questions, like "How did God know you were going to be my mommy?" At the time, we lobbed back simple answers

that satisfied her curious mind. For example, I told her, "God picked me out special just for you." Piece of cake.

At Christmas, we talked about baby Jesus and who he was. I'd buy or check out some books that touched on the true meaning of Christmas that fit closely with our faith and would use storybook examples as a bridge to any gaps in my teaching. A dash of Santa, a touch of Jesus—God, I mean gosh, these kids were turning out great.

I was still feeling pretty good about my competency in raising faithful children despite our lack of church attendance.

When the kids got older and the questions started getting tougher about who exactly this Jesus fellow was and where exactly was heaven and how come we can't see God but he can see us, I went to a Christian bookstore and bought books with titles like *Who Made God?* and *Someday Heaven*. I'd like to say they helped, but to be honest I think the kids were so bored that they pretended to understand so I would stop reading these books to them.

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And then the fish died. There's nothing like your child's first experience with death to slap a pop quiz of spiritual aptitude on you. First, I thanked God it was just a fish. As I looked at my 5 1/2-year-old son, his body heaving with sobs, my heart ached for him, and I decided it was time to step up the religious education, hoping deeper meaning would provide him some level of comfort.

Here's just a little snippet of how well it went:

Me: Honey, I know you're sad your fish is gone, but he's in a better place. (It wasn't even his fish; it was his sister's. She was in bed, blissfully unaware that she should be sad that her fish just got flushed. She had closure with "Bye-bye, Fishy!")

Son: Where did the fish go?

Me: He's in heaven, honey. (Fish in heaven? Not sure. Sounds good.)

Son: How can he be in heaven if Daddy said we flushed him to the ocean?

Me: Um, well, fish go to a special heaven. Ocean heaven. (Curse Daddy. Where is he anyway? Let him field some of these questions!)

Son: Why did he die? (OK, bought Ocean heaven! Moving on!)

Me: Oh, honey. Everything dies. Things don't live forever. (Sensing teachable moment with aging family dog, I go for it.) Even our doggie isn't going to live too much longer. But just because we lose them doesn't mean we stop loving them.

Son: Kyber's going to die?! (Uncontrollable sobbing. What was I thinking?)

Me: The dog's fine! The dog's fine! I'm just trying to say . . . Hey, want to get a Slurpee tomorrow?

Needless to say, there is a reason why I was a public schoolteacher and not a Catholic schoolteacher.

In all seriousness, in wanting the best for my children I know they are going to need a strong moral compass, a solid belief system and the safety net of unquestionable faith to get them through life. It's a confusing, wonderful and horrible world out there, and I will do whatever is necessary to prepare my children emotionally, physically, educationally and spiritually for what lies ahead.

I take any opportunity to thank God for my children. Without any hesitation, I can say having children has made me a better person. I pray regularly that I will do right by these gifts from heaven. That I will be able to do everything in my power to provide for them a solid introduction into everything necessary to be a good human being with a full, productive, happy life on earth—and beyond. And in order to do that, I know I must teach them, no matter how tricky and hard it can be sometimes, to have faith and thank God for our blessings.

We still have our work cut out for us, though. The other day in the car, my daughter told me in an exasperated tone, "I don't know why we sing a song thanking God for our snack. We should be singing a song thanking the grocery store. That's where food comes from."

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