

The Greatest Gift

*And now these three remain:
Faith, hope and love.
But the greatest of these is love*

This month, we celebrate the gift of love by celebrating Valentine's Day. Legend has it that the holiday bears the name of a priest who died in 270 A.D. Observed in mid-February each year, Valentine's Day is a memorial to someone who loved others so much that it cost him his life. Though stories about Valentine's life and death vary, it is clear that he has inspired people to love for centuries.

Millions of people will put romance on public display this month, while those of us who mourn a loved one may feel the need for a much deeper kind of love, an unconditional love. I learned about unconditional love from one who could not read, never attended a Sunday school class, cared nothing about philosophy or theology, and didn't like taking baths. His name is Cooper, a 45-pound Springer Spaniel who died this time last year, only a few days after my brother Harold died.

Cooper was a model of unconditional love. I could see it in his eyes even as he lay lifeless on the table in the veterinary hospital where we spent our last minutes with him. Cooper never met anyone he didn't like. He never did anything out of spite or anger, never growled or showed aggression toward another creature (except a bird – he was a bird dog, after all), and could inject joy and silliness into any situation. For his entire life, he never wanted to spend a minute apart from my family or me. He could receive love in the form of ear scratching and belly rubs for hours on end, and never stopped showing love in his eyes. As we said goodbye, memories of his life seemed to warm my heart even while it was breaking.

On our last day with Cooper, I remembered something else. We had two Springer Spaniel dogs before him, and lost them in different ways, but we never mourned either of them properly. On top of that, my brother's death the week before had been sudden, complicated, and confusing. On my own, I didn't know how to get to the bottom of my feelings, but with Cooper, I did. I discovered that unconditional love knows no boundaries as my love for all of them poured out of me in an instant. Because of Cooper, I felt the release to mourn them all: Dodger, Sunny, and my brother Harold. Through my tears, I thanked Cooper as I stroked his silky fur one last time, and felt my broken heart begin to heal.

Some say that we grieve because we have loved. This season of love may be a time when you are more aware of your grief, simply because you know that you have loved someone who loved you, and that they are no longer with you to express that love as in the past. It can also serve as a reminder that unconditional love never fails.

Humans have so many complications that sometimes we falter in showing love unconditionally, but I learned from Cooper that the very love that causes us pain can transcend the grave and help us heal. If it can do that, it can transcend anything.

In honor of my late best friend Cooper, I name him my Valentine, because he gave me the greatest gift of all. I am better for having known and loved him. I only hope I can live up to his example of unflinching love every day of my life