

A LIGHT IN THE MIST


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*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all.*

Emily Dickinson



“The little live nightingale ... had come
to sing of comfort and hope. As he
sang, the phantoms grew pale, and still
more pale, and the blood flowed quicker
and quicker through the Emperor’s fee-
ble body. Even Death listened, and
said, “Go on, little nightingale, go on!”

The Nightingale
Hans Christian Andersen

The Pet Partners Program

When I was growing up, I always had pets in the house, from dogs to turtles to fish to birds. Today I share my ranch with three Rhodesian ridgeback dogs with whom I have a very special bond. They often make me laugh, sometimes make me furious, and always take me out of myself (not to mention out of my house every day for a long walk). Sometimes when I'm feeling blue or overwhelmed with problems, I initiate a session of dog psychotherapy, which I recommend highly: For the price of one biscuit, my dog sits down and listens intently to my troubles and is only slightly less interactive than the Freudian psychoanalyst I went to many years ago.

In a more recent study of some 1,000 elderly Canadians reported in the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* this past March, those who lived with a pet were found to be better able to attend to the activities of daily life than were their petless peers. Pet owners also said their animals helped them get through periods of crisis. The routine of caring for a pet, noted the researchers, helps keep elderly people more active and so may lead to better health. In addition, having a pet counters the lack of social support and isolation felt by many older people. Trained dogs can also dramatically improve the quality of life for those who are blind, deaf or disabled. I've often suggested to patients that they get a pet, especially if they seem lonely or disconnected or too self-absorbed. If you feel that you would benefit from having an animal in your life and are able to do so, I strongly encourage you to look into it, or even consider a temporary adoption from an animal shelter. And if you already have an animal companion and would like to share the wealth, consider signing up for a program that allows you to bring your pet to visit residents of a nursing home, hospital or other institutional setting. Some programs don't require that you own a pet to participate; they'll pair you up with a shelter animal for your visit. For information on one such program, contact the Pet Partners Program at the Delta Society, (800)869-6898; www.petsforum.com/deltasociety.

by Dr. Andrew Weil

Reprinted, with permission,
from *Self Healing*, December 1999

Animal Connections

Reconcile yourself with the animal inside you and you will become healthy and whole.

East German Pastor

Lucy was my first; my first true animal connection that is. I suppose you could say she was actually my step-cat, since she had adopted my partner several years before we met by engineering her way into the house through the garden vent of the clothes dryer. True to this entrance, she was a profoundly self-determined, regal (à la Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday*), and completely endearing creature, who abides with us still, though now—sadly—only in spirit.

This relationship with Lucy made me a particularly receptive audience for *Animal Connections*, a 1995 film by the Montreal filmmaker Philip Herbison, who explores in this playful yet moving documentary our special relationship with animals and its various expressions throughout history and across cultures. Deceptively simple in its premise, it begins as Herbison's personal and somewhat whimsical search to find the animal connection he'd had as a child. At a crossroads in his life, he sets out with his camera to satisfy this need he increasingly feels to reconnect with animals and to rekindle his youthful "fascination with critters of all kinds."

If the film were a novel, one might say that it had a *picaresque* quality, for Herbison and his camera take us on an adventure that is humorous, satiric and profound by turns. The National Zoo in Washington D.C., an animal blessing for the Feast of St. Francis at Manhattan's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and the offices of P.E.T.A. (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) are just a few of the places we visit with the filmmaker as he interviews cultural historians, animal rights activists and a wide variety of individuals whose lives are deeply entwined with animals.

At the heart of this film, however, is a sincere quest to understand our affinity for animals and their place in our lives. Is it our identification with animals that inspires our attachments, as one person in the film suggests, or is it our differences that endear animals to us and allow for the intimate bonds that form? In any case, as the film ends it is the questions that seem more important than the answers. In the final scene we see Herbison releasing a duck at the water's edge; the bird's first encounter with its natural habitat. What does seem clear at this moment is that the deep connection we are capable of making with animals is as mysterious as it is life enhancing and unconditional. DA

Animal Connections is available through personal arrangement with Philip Herbison. Fax 802.253.2510

Creature Comforts

What is it about animals that is so comforting? Is it their simplicity of needs? Their absolute dependence? The purity of their essence?

I have always been inordinately attached to animals. They have been my comfort in separation, divorce, even death. I have identified with them to such an extent that they have symbolized me in dreams. I have mourned their deaths so deeply I dared not replace them.

I once had a goldfish, Fred, who only came to the surface to be fed when I entered the room and who died (I was convinced of a broken heart) when I went on a six-week vacation.

I had a rabbit that the vet concluded lived to the unheard-of age of ten because of the strength of our connection. (It was Bacall who symbolized me in a dream of my divorce—bloody and dismembered.)

Sorbet, my canary, greeted the day with such glorious song I could barely function when he met an untimely and tragic death.

My friend, Barbara, who had ovarian cancer at the time, bought a canary so that her days might be similarly blessed with song. She was convinced that the spirit of Sorbet taught her bird to sing.

So when my father struggled with cancer for the final seven years of his life, I, of course, thought he might find comfort in animal companionship. He often complained of feeling like a prisoner in his beautiful condo (blessed as he was to be able to afford home care). Everytime I visited from the West Coast I urged him, "Dad, why don't you get a kitten, a canary and a tropical fish tank?"

Finally, the third time I ventured that suggestion he snapped,

"When you have cancer, you can get a kitten, a canary and a tropical fish tank!"

And I know I will. KS



The bird is symbolic of the release of the spirit from bondage to the earth, just as the serpent is symbolic of the bondage to the earth.

Joseph Campbell

Birdy

Yes, it was I who shouted over the phone, “no more pets.” Marlene and my daughter, Becca, had called to ask if it would be all right to take one of the puppies from the caretakers across the street. When they picked me up at work the puppy was under my daughter’s coat; I turned around and meekly said, “O.K.”

How could I resist those big brown eyes and that soft auburn hair?

Birdy was amazing from the start. She is a mixed breed and she got the best of everything from wherever she came.

When she was about a year old some neighbors asked if they could walk her. At first it was two ladies that walked her three times a week in the late afternoon, and then another woman and her dog joined the group. As time went on, anyone that wanted to powerwalk joined the group. Birdy was almost uncontrollable with excitement when late afternoon approached. When she saw the group come up the driveway her tail almost wagged off.

As the years went by, they added Sunday morning, all the way to the shopping center and back. So on Sundays we had a new alarm clock. At 6 am sharp, the tail banged on the side of the bed: *Hurry up and get me out the door!* There existed a silent love affair between Birdy and the walkers.

Now Birdy is thirteen years old and her face has turned white, her gait has slowed considerably, but with all the effort she could muster she would still go on the walk. I thought how sad the day would be when she wouldn’t be able to make it.

That day came sooner than I anticipated. She was like a girl sent home from school. A short time after the walk began the door knocker pounded. There were Birdy and Walter. “We had to get the car to bring her home. This is really a very sad day.”

We were stunned at first, something you dread had finally really happened.

However, after sometime we started to look at the situation differently. Did this happen because Birdy really wanted to walk with me instead, or was it because she wanted to take the time to stop along the way to smell the roses?

A new plan emerged. Shorter, but more frequent walks. I thought a change of pace might be the right thing for her as well as myself. I’ve been busy

lately and haven’t been able to spend much time with my usual music and reading. Now, with this new routine I can listen to my books and music on tape as we walk.

Some nights after work I feel like I just won’t be able to do one more thing, but now she expects this nightly routine and in the end it benefits both of us.

How can you disappoint an old friend with such unconditional love. One couldn’t ask for a warmer and closer companion. Thanks, Birdy, for sharing another one of life’s challenges with me. SS



The Eden Alternative

It was at the International Symposium on Health Care Design that we first heard of the Eden Alternative. Dr. Bill Thomas feels that patients in nursing homes fare much better if they are connected to plants and animals. A story we heard confirms this. A gentleman was so deeply depressed upon being admitted to a nursing home that he lay on his bed motionless for three weeks. Finally one day, observing the dogs running in the halls, he bounced out of bed and declared affirmatively, “Someone’s got to walk these dogs!” KS

From the mission statement of the Eden Alternative:

The Eden Alternative shows us how companion animals, the opportunity to give meaningful care to other living creatures, and the variety and spontaneity that mark an enlivened environment can succeed where pills and therapies fail.

For more information:
http://www.edenalt.com/about_eden/mission.htm

Traci

Recovering from the loss of her Great Pyrenees, Sumo, Traci found comfort in writing this letter to her beloved pet.

The way you look when you are asleep, Angel dog, doesn’t do you justice. You look so peaceful and, really, like you wouldn’t hurt a flea.

Your frisky way of playing. Running around and around and around the cherry tree. Coming to a sliding stop. Running around and around in the other direction. You make me tired just watching you.

On the count of “three” your ballet-like jump in the air—a slight twist to your body as you reach up to catch your teddy bear.

The fact that I can kiss your nose ten times and never kiss the same place twice.

The way you have always been pretty cool to the cats. We know you are capable of doing harm, but you don’t seem to really be that interested in them. Sure you tease them, but you never lose yourself to the chase (like some of your other dog friends). Especially with Izzy. Watching you play with Angus and Trout.

You and Angus on the beach. You decided not to play but to guard. You hid in the layers of the sand and just watched as Angus went off and played. If you didn’t like how other dogs treated him, you came out running and barking. Very protective of those you cared about. TTP



Nate and Rendi

Nathan Olivera is a distinguished artist who has been a close friend of mine for many years. In fact, we went to the same high school together. Over the years, Nate has always displayed a great affinity for his dogs. So I spoke with him, in his Palo Alto studio, for this animal issue of A Light in the Mist.

Sam: Why do you prefer rottweilers to other breeds—first Max, then Mona’s dog Blue and now Rindi?

Nate: I like their strength, loyalty, their devotion and... they look like real dogs. They have a sense of humor that is always there, all three dogs. They have a strong fundamental presence. There is no mistaking it, they are a great breed. Contrary to opinion, they are gentle, friendly and not aggressive unless taught to be that way or bred for aggression.

Sam: As a leading and well-known artist, do you relate Rindi to your work in any way? (I notice a nice painting of Max on your wall.) Does Rindi influence your work?

Nate: Max was always in my work; his fur is in the very paint, so is Rindi. I just finished a large “red” dog, part African wild, part invention. Together they are Rindi and his presence is in the painting.

Sam: On a functional note, how does Rindi offer protection or safety?

Nate: Rindi is a rottweiler. They are, by nature, protective, but so are most dogs. He is my failing muscles, my own presence, he impresses people. I feel leaving Mona at home with him and Blue that everything will be O.K. They have a real sense of right and wrong, and that is good knowing that they do. They are incredibly intelligent.

Sam: Do you find that, in bad times, Rindi comforts or eases the situation?

Nate: Always, so did Max and Blue. They are friends that offer you compassion and understanding. A silent but good friend that is always there to remove you from a reality that is annoying or hurting. They give you unconditional love in a world where it, at times, is hard to find.

Sam: Can you describe Max’s last days and share your feelings? (Don’t talk about it if it is painful.)

Nate: There is little to share. He knew, as did Mona and I, that he was going. We were helpless with his efforts to be normal or strong. I took him into the vet to see if more could be done; all that we realized was that it would be better to let him go and be out of pain. Joe, my vet (Max’s good friend), and I gathered around him. I held him and felt the release of his spirit. It was the best for Max, but very painful. Max was no longer with me.

Sam: Have you ever been in some kind of pain, either physically or emotionally, that Rindi comforted you and made it more tolerable?

Nate: When things go poorly Rindi is always there. He listens, he cares and I know and appreciate that.

Sam: As the world becomes more and more complex (the traffic, the long line at the market, etc.) the simple, pure relationship to a pet becomes more meaningful— or does it?

Nate: Oh, yes. My mother-in-law, when she was in a convalescent home, always wanted to see Max. I would take him to the home for that reason. As we went through the halls, all of the elderly reached out for him. Max was a good close friend to all and especially to me. Today with Rindi, if I get up to go to the can, Rindi is at my side. He is everywhere that I go. He is assurance and also a real sense of security. SS

Benefits of Pets

Q: Are pets beneficial for people with heart disease?

A: Yes, there is bonafide evidence that both dogs and cats can lower stress levels in people with heart disease. In a recent study, researchers subjected stockbrokers with high blood pressure to mentally and psychologically stressful tasks, such as counting backwards or giving a speech. Researchers then measured the increases in the stockbrokers’ heart rates and blood pressures, which are indicators of a stress response. All started taking blood-pressure medication, and half were given a dog or a cat to take home. Six months later, researchers gave the participants another mental stress test. The medication-only group had a stress response that was twice as high as the group with pets (the pets accompanied their owners during the test). Other studies have shown that having a dog, as well as other forms of social support such as being happily married, are also linked to improved survival in people with heart disease. Finally, in addition to stress reduction, having a dog may encourage you to walk more, which is also good for your heart.

by Howard C. Hermann, M.D.

Reprinted, with permission, from *Heart Watch*, January 2000.



When Susan Chernak McElroy developed cancer, a small cat taught her the meaning of love and the power of commitment. She vowed that if she were to survive, her life's mission would be to share the comfort and transformative power of animals with the world.

During the first months following my cancer diagnosis, I wouldn't acknowledge any kind of healing but physical healing. I wasn't interested in techniques that could help me cope better or extend my life expectancy by a few months; mere remission or "quality of life" didn't capture my attention either. Full recovery was the only option I would accept and I was willing to do anything, go anywhere, to achieve it.

When my surgeries and radiation treatments were over, I found myself in that frightening twilight zone of life after treatment. The doctors had done all they could and I was on my own to wonder if I'd be alive or dead by the following year. For the sake of my sanity, I tried hard to convince myself and anyone else who would listen that I was doing just fine and that cancer was no death sentence. My motto became, "I don't write off cancer patients." I was ferocious and flailing.

Only two weeks earlier, my lover and I had parted ways. I was feeling confused and frightened about the future. Alone in bed at night, I would look at the white walls and wonder who would want a thirty-nine-year-old cancer patient. Life in my apartment was dismally quiet. Then, Flora entered my life—a skinny feral kitten about four weeks old, full of ringworm, fleas, and earmites. Shivering and alone under the wheel-well of my parked car, Flora looked desperately sick. I grabbed hold of her scraggly tail and tugged. Within seconds my hand was scratched to shreds, but I hung on and brought her hissing and complaining to my apartment. At that point, I realized my lonely life welcomed the commotion of a tiny, angry kitten who would distract me from my own depressing thoughts. With the arrival of the kitten, I pulled my energy away from myself and my fretful imaginings and concentrated on healing Flora. Along with ringworms and fleas, she had a terrible viral infection that had ulcerated her tongue, cheeks and throat. I knew all about ulcers in the mouth, so I sympathized wholeheartedly with this miserable condition. It took weeks, but

slowly Flora healed, and along the way we bonded. Soon, she was a loving, trusting ball of black-and-white fuzz who met me at my door each evening when I returned from work. The loneliness of my apartment vanished, and I cherished the success of our health venture together. Although my own future looked uncertain, success with Flora seemed to be something I could achieve.

Only weeks after I'd finally nursed Flora back to some resemblance of a healthy kittenhood, she was diagnosed with feline leukemia. Cancer. Her veterinarian gave her the same sorry prognosis my oncologist had given me: Flora would most likely die within a year or two. My response was instant and unconscious. As soon as Flora's vet handed down the diagnosis, I wrote her off as a lost cause. Quickly, my emotional attachment to her ceased as I began to protect myself from the pain of her death, which I knew would come. The veterinarian had told me Flora would die and I simply accepted this. I stopped speaking to Flora and playing with her, because when I did I would end up hysterically sobbing for my kitten. It even became difficult for me to look at her. But Flora simply wouldn't let me pull away. When I'd walk past her, she'd chase after me. Her paw touched my cheek hesitantly each night as she curled up next to me in bed, her purr resonant and strong. If my mood was chilly, she seemed not to notice. Flora did what cats do best, waited and watched.

Her patience finally won out. One night I had an "AHA!" experience about my attitude toward Flora. How could I believe my own cancer wasn't a death sentence when I couldn't see the same hope for her? How could I dismiss any being without dismissing myself? Although I was busy blathering about hope and healing, I knew that I honestly saw myself in the grave.

That realization was a profound turning point for me. It was slow in coming, but when it did, it hit me like a downpour of hail stones. How often in my life had I turned away from pain and loss, and from honest feeling? Living at "half-life," I'd put away emotion at the first inkling of loss, and had nearly lost myself in the process.

One night shortly after my awakening, I lit a candle for Flora and myself. We sat together looking at the flame, and I vowed to Flora that I would love her with wild abandon for as long as she was with me, because loving her felt so good. Pulling away from her hurt, and I didn't need any more painful isolation in my life. In loving Flora, I knew I would find a way to love myself as well — poor diagnosis and all. For the both of us, each day of life would be a day we could celebrate together.

I began a quest to heal Flora that included many of the same gems of complementary medicine I was attempting on myself. Flora got acupressure, vitamins, homeopathy, music and color therapy, detoxifying baths, and unlimited quantities of hugs, love, and affection. Her

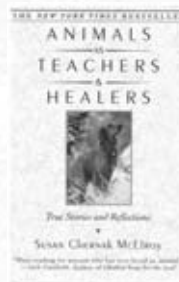
water bowl had tiny, colorful crystals in it. Her collar was a healing green.

What was most important in this process, though, was the attitude change I experienced from this "mumbo-jumbo," as some of my bewildered friends called it. Healing stopped being so painfully heavy. It became fun, even silly. When I told my friends I might have my house visited by dowsters to seek out and correct "bad energy vibration," I damn well had to have a highly developed sense of humor!

Over the next few months, I slowly learned that healing is more than heroics over illness. Healing isn't simply an end result, it's a process. Flora helped me reclaim the joy that had died after my cancer treatment and my previous relationship had ended. She brought me tremendous peace with her quiet, trusting presence. Finally, as I saw Flora healed, loved, and cherished, I knew I could honestly hold the same hopeful vision for myself.

Flora is sleek, happy, and seven years old today. Her last three tests for leukemia have been negative. At the time of my "AHA" with Flora, I felt that she was an angel sent to teach me that turning away from love accomplishes nothing. I believe that Flora was ready to die to bring me her message...if that's what it would have taken.

By Susan Chernak McElroy



Reprinted, with permission, from *Animals as Teachers & Healers* by Susan Chernak McElroy, Ballantine Books, 1998

PACK OF TWO

When Caroline Knapp sought to reconstruct her life at the age of thirty-six, it was her love of an eight-week-old puppy that led her home.

A recovering alcoholic who had recently lost both her parents, Caroline found the power of connection needed to heal and transform her life. In this New York Times bestseller, Caroline shares not only her personal love story, but others' stories as well.

Jack Stephens, a fifty-one-year-old veterinarian who established and now runs the VPI Insurance Group, in Anaheim, California, the nation's oldest and largest health insurance company for pets, understands the therapeutic value of pets, but he learned about it the hard way, through personal experience. As a practicing vet, Stephens had been aware of the rising tide of articles about the psychological value of pets in veterinary journals for years, but he'd always felt a tad skeptical about the concept, a feeling that crept into his view of his practice as well. People seemed so...over the top about dogs. He'd see owners indulging their dogs, crying over them when they got sick, dripping with emotion, and he just didn't quite get it; although he loved animals himself and always appreciated their company, he'd shake his head at half his clients, then go home and make little jokes about how overinvolved they were. "I think a lot of people in the veterinary profession don't quite realize how bonded people are to their dogs," he says. "There's still the idea that they don't have that much value."

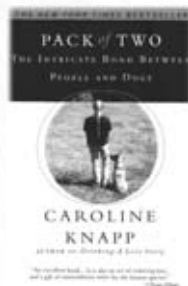
Jack Stephens's own doubts about the bond disappeared about seven years ago, when he was diagnosed with throat cancer and underwent five grueling months of radiation and chemotherapy treatments. Several months before his illness was discovered, Jack's wife had acquired a miniature Doberman pinscher—another source of skepticism to Jack, a rather hard-boiled fellow who favored big working breeds and found something distasteful and rather unmasculine about little dogs. But this one—a small, sleek-coated, and uncommonly intelligent creature named Spanky—had a particular brand of charm that struck Jack as special from the start. He was a very expressive dog—when the family left him at home alone, he'd literally toilet-paper the house in protest, grabbing a roll of tissue from the upstairs bathroom, then running down the hall and stairs with it, streaming paper the whole way—and his affinity for Jack, whom he adored, had a quality of insistence that broke down Jack's defenses somehow. Spanky decided early on that he liked Jack's pillow, and each night he'd slowly and persistently edge Jack's head off it, then burrow into the pillowcase, and spend the night curled up inside. Jack doesn't have a very high tolerance for that kind of behavior ("canine nonsense," in his words), but he couldn't help himself: in Spanky, he found it completely endearing.

When Jack developed cancer and began treatment, his relationship with the dog changed. Some nights Jack's nausea got so bad, he'd sleep in another room. Spanky would quietly accompany him, staying close through the night,

watching him. He had an instinctive sense for Jack's needs—how much distance he required and how much contact—and although Jack had a large and supportive network of friends and family members, the dog provided what he calls a "crucial link" in his recovery. Spanky made him laugh. He motivated him to get up and take daily walks instead of languishing in bed. His presence—entertaining, attentive, utterly undemanding—helped him avoid self-pity. Jack Stephens, an Oklahoma native who prides himself on his machismo, found himself referring to this tiny dog as "my little angel man from heaven," and his attachment to Spanky taught him volumes about the clients he once privately chided in his practice. The dog, he says, allowed him "to experience a different world with pets," to appreciate the power of our connections with them.

Jack Stephens's experience speaks to the profound satisfactions of living with a dog, the therapeutic properties of their mere presence. Some of this is physical: a number of well-known studies have shown that petting a dog—in some cases, even being in the same room as a dog—has a calming effect on people, reducing blood pressure and heart rate. But there's also something psychically healing about being with dogs, and you don't have to be a cancer survivor—or a resident at a geriatric nursing home or a juvenile delinquent or a prisoner or a psychiatric patient—to appreciate the effect.

By Caroline Knapp



Reprinted, with permission, from
Pack of Two by Caroline Knapp,
Delta, 1999

Recommended Animal and Therapy Books

A Place for Grace
by Jean Davies Okimoto
Econo-Clad Books, 1999

*Good For Your Animals, Good
For You. How to Live and Work
with Animals in Activity and
Therapy Programs and Stay Healthy*
by David Waltner-Toews and Andrea
Ellis, 1994

*Nature as a Guide—Using
Nature in Counseling, Therapy
and Education*
by Linda Lloyd Nebbe, 1995

Rosie, a Visiting Dog's Story
by Stephanie Calmenson,
Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998

Pack of Two
by Caroline Knapp,
Delta, 1999

Animals as Teachers & Healers
by Susan Chernak McElroy,
Ballantine Books, 1998

Animal Connections (Video)
Phillip Herbison
Fax 802.253.2510

The clinical literature on dogs as agents of healing is vast. Boris Levinson, an American child psychiatrist, coined the phrase pet therapy in 1964, following observations he made when he began to use his dog, a shaggy creature named Jingles, in sessions with severely withdrawn children. The dog, Levinson noted, served as an ice-breaker, softening the children's defenses and providing a focus for communication; with the animal present, Levinson could join in, establish a rapport, and begin therapy. Levinson wasn't the first scientist to study the use of animals in treating psychological disorders—but he was the first to write seriously and extensively about it, and he's credited with sparking widespread research into the phenomenon. Scientists and health care professionals have since put Levinson's theories into practice in scores of therapeutic settings, and their results are uniformly consistent: animals can improve morale and communication, bolster self-confidence and self-esteem, increase quality of life.

Excerpted from *Pack of Two*
by Caroline Knapp

Dear Friends—

Following our spirit of innovation, we have decided to try something new this year. Four of us work on the newsletter and this year each of us will take charge of one issue—speaking to a topic close to our hearts. The first issue addressed my primary concern: grief. This issue speaks to Sam's love of animals as a source of comfort. Our third issue will focus on Dorcas's interest in the healing power of the expressive arts. And in our final issue Traci will review her two design projects (healing environments) for the year: The San Francisco AIDS Foundation and The West Clinic (a cancer center in Memphis, Tennessee). We hope that by speaking from our hearts we will touch yours. As always, Kate

TOGETHER WE WILL COMFORT THE SUFFERING

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to aid the current movement toward holistic medicine—toward treating the whole patient (mind, body, spirit) and encouraging hospitals, hospices and individuals to nourish patients, families and caregivers with healing environments. What is a healing environment? We believe a healing environment is one that offers sustenance to the soul and gives meaning to experience. It is one that enables those who are suffering to transcend their pain by connecting to the universal through the transformative power of beauty and art, and that gives comfort through this connection.

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