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Karrot's Tale

How the Loss of a Pet Inspired a Family to Chase Their Dreams and Create a Legacy

by Leon Hill with Marie Hill

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KARROT'S TALE



*How the Loss of a Pet Inspired
a Family to Chase Their Dreams
and Create a Legacy*

LEON HILL *with* MARIE HILL
Co-founders of Final Gift

*Karrot's Tale: How the Loss of a Pet Inspired a Family
to Chase Their Dreams and Create a Legacy*

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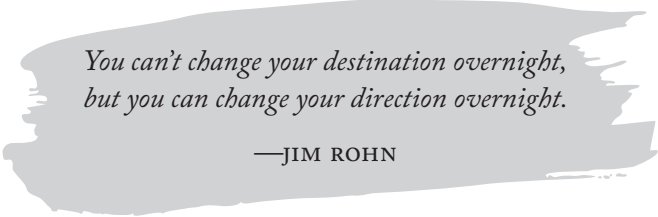
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SAYING GOODBYE

Finding Inspiration from Our Loss



*You can't change your destination overnight,
but you can change your direction overnight.*

—JIM ROHN

THE ALARM CLOCK JUST WENT OFF and it was already a very hectic morning. I had to get to work early for an important meeting but was concerned when our little girl Felicia woke with a very unusual cough. Felicia was our eleven-year-old, gray and white miniature poodle mix who had worked her way into the center of our lives and was loved dearly. As I jumped into the shower, I suggested to my wife, Marie, that she take her in for a visit with the vet, and she agreed.

I arrived at work and immediately went out to the factory to meet with my staff and check on their progress in getting ready for our plant tour. The tour was scheduled to be the first part of a very important meeting we had arranged with senior-level bankers. We were trying to obtain refinancing for our failing company and I had to make sure nothing went wrong.

The plant was humming and it looked great. Everything was in order, all the machines were running, and everyone looked busy. As we walked through, I pointed out a few last details that needed attention before the meeting could start. There was a lot of excitement in the air because everyone had worked so hard to get the plant in tiptop shape for this meeting. It seemed like there was an extra level of pride in what the team had been able to accomplish.

As we were walking back to the conference room to review our to-do list, I received a call on my cell that would change my life forever.

“Oh my God, Leon, she’s dead,” Marie cried.

“Who’s dead?” I asked

“Our little girl,” she replied.

Everything inside me felt like it had stopped as I stood in disbelief. I was paralyzed in grief. People continued to walk by and my staff continued on with their conversations, but the words just went through me and I heard nothing. I just stood there unable to move as the world around me continued. I felt hollow, stunned, and empty. The machines were in full operation like they always

were at this time of the day, but I heard nothing, just those words.

I left abruptly to find a private space so I could process what I had just heard. I don't remember how I got back to my office. I just remember shutting the door and walking to the conference table to sit down. It felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. I remember trying to hide my tears in disbelief but I just couldn't do it. How could this be true and how could this have happened? It was only a cough. The grief was so overwhelming and I didn't know how I could continue on through the day. All I wanted to do was go home to be with my family and to hold my wife. All I wanted to do is see our little girl Felicia again.

I had no time and my meeting was about to start, but how could I conduct a meeting after receiving this news and in the state of mind I was in? My family needed me, so I grabbed my jacket and started toward the door to inform my boss when I decided to call my wife back to check on her.

She was still hysterical but was able to share more details as to what had happened. Fighting through her tears, she explained that she had called our son, Keith, after I had left for work so that he could drive her and Felicia to the Emergency Veterinary Clinic. On the way there Felicia was having more trouble breathing and continued to cough. Once they arrived, the triage nurse immediately determined that Felicia was in need of emergency care and needed oxygen so they asked that my wife allow them to take her back into the Emergency Room for treatment right away. Marie and Keith didn't want to let her go because she was very

nervous and she started to shake. Marie didn't know what to do. She felt terrible but didn't know what else to do.

After a few minutes Marie and Keith heard an urgent code called over the intercom, and Marie said to Keith, "I hope that's not for Felicia." They waited, worrying about her, when finally a woman vet came out to the waiting area and sat with them. Marie told the vet that they had heard the code called and hoped it was not for Felicia. The vet said that it was and she was very sorry but Felicia had suffered cardiac arrest and had passed away. They had done everything they could to revive her but nothing had worked. They had lost her.

The vet said that when they brought her back for treatment, she had seen another dog and started to bark. The stress from barking and her condition were more than her little heart could take. Marie asked the doctor what she meant by her condition and she said that she had developed fluid around her heart and lungs, a condition called pleural effusion. "I can't believe she is gone, Leon," Marie told me. "I can't believe she died. Our poor little girl..."

"I am so sorry, Marie. Are you still there at the hospital? I can meet you there."

"Yes, we are still here. They are asking what type of aftercare we want for her and I am so confused—I just want to take her home with us."

"Okay, bring her home and I will meet you there."

"Okay, but take care of your meeting first. Keith and I will be

at home when your meeting is over. I know the meeting is very important and you need to be there. We will take care of Felicia and you try to keep it together for the meeting. We will be here when you are done.”

I hung up the phone in complete disbelief. We had just had Felicia at the vet’s office two weeks earlier for her checkup and she was fine. I felt terrible about having to stay and having to leave Marie and Keith alone to deal with all of this. I wiped the tears from my face and tried to get myself together when my office phone rang. It was my boss, asking if we were ready to start the meeting. I said we were ready and headed to the conference room.

On the way to the conference room a wave of panic came over me. This was not just another meeting; this was a meeting that had major consequences. Without this financing we would not be able to continue operating our business for more than a week. It was 2002, a time when most businesses that made commodity-type products were in direct competition with the Asian labor market. Many companies had moved most of their manufacturing offshore to compete and we had not. I knew it would be a lost cause. We made die castings—a highly labor-intensive product in a high-pay demographic with a factory full of old, inefficient, and tired equipment that needed a lot of work. The work required a lot of capital to repair them, and there was no capital. Hell, we could barely make payroll.

We had enough aluminum ingot to last just three more days. Our supplier refused shipment without payment for the ninety

days past due on the account, and any future shipments had to be COD. This was the last supplier of ingot that would even answer our calls. We were even melting the slow-moving and obsolete inventory that we were trying to collateralize in the meeting that was about to start.

At this point in my career I had been in the manufacturing industry for eighteen years with a few different companies. I had been blessed with a great career and had the opportunity to manage and visit factories all over the world. I had just recently joined this company in an effort to pull it out of the ashes, but I knew from the start it would be a challenge with a very small chance of success. But it was a job; more on that later in the book.

I could not wait for the meeting to be over. I had a hard time staying focused. Waves of grief overwhelmed me, and at times I would catch a tear running down my face during the presentation. Thankfully the lights were out during the Powerpoint presentation, but I managed to get through it. It was difficult.

I had a forty-five-minute drive back home, and honestly I don't remember it. I don't remember taking the highway or the left onto route 99. I don't remember taking the right at the fire station or coming up the driveway. All I remember was thinking about Felicia and all the great times we had and how she had been the one who had gotten me through one of the most difficult times in my life. She had always been there no matter what. Total unconditional love and asked for nothing in return.

I remembered how she was always there when I missed my

kids so much after my divorce. She always knew when I was sad, down, and needed a friend. There were many days when the pain of not seeing my children every day was so intense that without her the days would have been too much to bear.

I entered the house to find my wife waiting to greet me. We just stood there holding one another, crying, unable to speak. When I could finally pick my head up from her shoulder, I could see Felicia's cardboard casket laying on the couch in our living room. It had a small bouquet of flowers taped to the top. I remembered Marie's words on the phone when she said she was confused and didn't know what to do once she found out Felicia had passed. I felt that same emotion as I looked at her laying there in her casket on the couch.

Up until this point we had never, ever thought of not having her or what we would do if we lost her. I kissed Marie on her head and asked if she was okay. She said again that she did not know what we should do. "She is just lying there like she is asleep and I just want to wake her up," she said.

I walked over to the couch and placed my hands onto the casket and started to weep again. I can't explain the pain I felt; it was just so strong and devastating. I wanted to take her out of the casket so that I could hold her and we could both pet her and tell her how much we loved her, how sorry we were for not knowing she was sick, and how we already missed her.

The hospital had done a great job of getting Felicia together and ready for my wife and son to transport her. The flowers were

so sweet. But I remember feeling that the casket was cardboard and had tape on it. Felicia deserved better. As I opened the casket, I could see our little girl just lying there like she was in a peaceful sleep. I reached down and gently lifted her out so that we could say goodbye to her there in her home.

I asked Marie how Keith was doing and where he was. She said that he was a mess and had to take care of some things but would be back soon. After an hour or so of carrying Felicia around the house in our arms, reminiscing about her, the conversation went back to what we should do with her remains and what options the hospital had given us. She said that they offered cremation or burial services but she did not really understand the different options for each. They offered a private burial or communal country burial, individual cremation or communal cremation. Not being familiar with these terms, we decided to make a few calls. We placed Felicia on top of her favorite blanket on the couch and started to research our options.

After calling the hospital and the pet aftercare provider recommended by the hospital, we were able to better understand our options but were not completely satisfied. We knew that we did not want either communal option. The thought of our little girl being buried or cremated with a bunch of other pets in a common hole or crematory was not for us. Country burial sounds nice but is visually horrifying. Getting her remains back from an individual cremation was a good option for us but the process of transportation from the hospital to the crematory and from the

crematory back to our family was not one we were comfortable with. It was going to take four to six weeks to complete and her remains were going to be shipped back to us via UPS. Our first thoughts were: Why does it take that long? Where will she be during the wait? What if the package gets lost? We both thought that these options were all too impersonal.

We decided that we wanted to escort her through the entire process so that we knew she was being handled properly and gently with dignity and respect. So that meant a home burial right next to her favorite bush in the front yard. She had always loved going outside to play, and when she tired herself out, she would lay down in her favorite spot next to that bush. The only issue we had was that it was late December and the ground was frozen. I didn't want Marie to be any more upset, so I told her that she knew that I had grown up on a farm and digging a hole through the frost was hard but not impossible and that I could do it.

So, with that, I put on my coat, went outside to get a shovel, and started to dig. I asked Marie to call Keith because I might need his help. It took a while—the frost was deep—but I managed to get it dug with the help of a pickaxe my wife had to borrow from her ex-husband.

Keith arrived shortly after the bush was dug up and the hole was dug. Keith was a tall and handsome young man with dark hair and a muscular build and had just turned thirty earlier in the month. As he drove up the driveway, I could feel a wave of emotion come over me and I started to cry. Keith was the one

who had brought Felicia into the family before Marie and I ever met. Marie didn't want a dog in the house but Keith convinced her to let Felicia spend one night in the house before he brought her back. Well, that was eleven years ago. Keith got out of the car and walked over to me, trying to hold back his tears. When he reached me, he reached out to give me a hug as we both wept in one another's arms. It was the first time I had ever seen Keith cry.

We all went back into the house to console one another and discuss how we would break the news to my two girls, Chelsea and Kayleigh, who were at their mom's, and to the rest of our family and friends. Once we had our plans, we decided to place Felicia back into the casket with a few of her toys and a personal item from each of us. It was time to bring her outside and put her to rest near her favorite bush in her favorite spot in the yard.

As we gathered around her gravesite, we all noticed how cold it was getting and some snow began to fall. We once again started to reminisce about how much of a girl little Felicia was and how she was such a little princess. Keith brought up the fact that if you put up your shoe, she wasn't too ladylike: she would grab your leg and hump your shoe. We all started to laugh because the first thing Keith's friends would do when they came to the house to visit was to ask where Felicia was so that they could get a "shoeshine."

Once again, the laughter turned to tears and it was time. I leaned over to pick up her casket and place her into her final resting place when Marie said, "How can we bury her outside in the cold? She has been with us every night of her life inside where

she was safe and warm.” We all just stared at each other. We knew she was right. I only wish she would have mentioned that before I had worked so hard to dig a hole through the thick frost and uprooted a four-foot-tall bush. So, all in agreement, Keith picked up Felicia and carried her back into the house. I replanted the bush and filled the hole that had taken hours to dig. Now what?

Once I was done, I put my tools away and returned to the house to discuss our next plan. “Okay, so we don’t feel comfortable leaving her at the hospital for the crematory to care for her, and we don’t want to bury her in the yard or at the cemetery because she has never been away from us, right? Our only other option is to have her cremated and have her remains sent back to us.”

“No,” Marie disagreed. “I want to be with her at the crematory. Can we bring her there and wait for the cremation to take place? That way they do not have to mail her remains back. We can just take her home where she belongs after the cremation. That way we will always be with her throughout the entire process and she will never be left alone. She can come home with us in an urn and be in our home with us forever, not out in the cold.”

“Okay, I can make some calls and see if that’s an option.” I started by looking in the phone book for providers of pet aftercare services in our area but found none. I then went to the internet and searched. I found a few in the New England area but the websites were not very helpful other than supplying contact information. After making a few calls all over New England, we finally found a pet crematory that was willing to let us bring our pet to them and

wait for her remains, but it was a long drive and we would have to wait until tomorrow to bring her there. I was amazed at how few options there were for families like mine going through this painful process. I was also amazed at how the customer service was being handled at all of the locations we had contacted. It was poor and insensitive, to say the least. So, we removed Felicia from the cardboard casket and made her comfortable once again on the couch with her blanket and waited for our journey in the morning. It was a tough night for all of the family.

Marie and I sat in bed the next morning after a poor night's sleep. It was very sad not having Felicia in the bed with us after all those years of her jumping up on the bed to say goodnight before lying at our feet. We both expected to hear her take her last drink for the night from her water bowl near our dresser and then run a few steps to get up enough momentum to jump up on the bed, but it never happened.

It was the holiday season so Marie made it a priority to put on the Christmas music every morning when we got out of bed. I'm not sure who enjoyed it more, Marie or Felicia. It was always so much fun for Marie and me to run around getting ready for work in the morning while listening because whenever the song from Mannheim Steamroller, "Silent Night," came on we would run around the house to try and find Felicia. She loved that song, and for some reason every time she heard it, she would fall asleep at the end. We would watch her without her knowing it. She would try so hard to keep her head up and her eyes open, but without

fail by the end of the song she would be fast asleep no matter how hard she tried.

Keith arrived at our house shortly after breakfast. It was time for us to go to the crematory in Massachusetts to have Felicia cared for. It was a beautiful winter morning; the snow was still falling a little and there was just a dusting on the ground. With the holiday music playing in the background, we expected a horse-drawn sleigh to pull up in the driveway at any minute—it was just that kind of feeling. So, I went over to the couch to pick up our little girl while Marie performed her ritual of checking the house before we locked up. As I was approaching the door with Felicia in my arms, the song from Mannheim Steamroller came on and I swear I heard her bark. I could not believe that song played just as we were leaving our home for the last time with Felicia. We all pulled ourselves together and got into the car. All of us had tears rolling down our faces like a waterfall. It was a very long and sad ride.

When we arrived at the crematory, we did not know what to expect. So, Marie and I walked into the office to find out what to do and what to expect while Keith stayed in the car with Felicia. The staff was very nice and accommodating and prepared us for the service. We opened the door and motioned to Keith that he could bring Felicia in. There was a small area where we could place Felicia on a viewing table to say our final goodbyes. We took a few minutes in private and then informed the staff that we were ready to start the process. They showed us the area where they would take Felicia and informed us that the cremation would take about

one and a half hours. We were welcome to stay or we could go have a coffee or lunch at the local diner.

We decided that we would watch the crematory operator place her gently into the crematory and then leave and come back. We all felt so bad that we were letting our little girl go and the tears continued to fall. Keith didn't want her to go alone so he took off his new Christmas sweater so that she could lay on it in the crematory. That seemed like a good idea to me so I ripped off the pocket of my shirt so that she would have something from me. Marie followed our lead by cutting off a piece of her turtleneck and placing it in the cardboard casket with her. They then gently took her from us and placed her in the crematory and shut the door. We all said goodbye again and left the building.

While driving to the diner, we all had a sense of relief that we had made the right decision for her care. We were glad that we were able to bring her to the crematory and wait to bring her home that same day. It was a feeling of closure so that we could move on to the healing process knowing that we had cared for her to the very end.

Time flew by at the diner as our attention briefly turned away from our loss and back to our day-to-day lives and work. We talked about my current job and how different it was from my past positions. I had left a job that I loved with a local valve company before going to work for the Die Casting company. I really didn't want to leave but it was the right move for our family. I had the position of director of Materials and Operations at the New

Hampshire facility. It was my dream job; I was on the executive fast track and was offered a promotion to become vice president of our Asian Operation. The gentleman who had the position was retiring, and because I had helped move the production of a few of our product lines from our New Hampshire locations to our China locations over the past few years, I was a natural fit.

Marie and I were laughing with Keith over some of the funny mishaps on our recent trip to China. The company had sent us both over so that we could be comfortable with our decision to relocate and the new job. We also had to find a place to live. It was a five-year contract and I would manage three factories located on the mainland—one in Ningbo, one in Beijing, and one in Tianjin. It was a great job; my ambition was always to be a vice president of Manufacturing and the opportunity had finally arrived. The only problem was now that I achieved that goal, I realized it wasn't really what I wanted for my life and my family. Because Marie and I had formed a blended family, such a dramatic relocation created a lot of serious concern. My stepson Keith and my two girls Chelsea and Kayleigh were still young and needed us near. In addition to that, Marie also took care of her elderly mom and aunt. So, after very serious consideration, we turned down the job. It was a difficult decision because it would have been a great launching pad for my career and it would have created a tremendous financial opportunity for our family.

We looked at the clock on the wall at the diner and realized that we had better return for Felicia. When we arrived back at

the crematory, everything had been completed and Felicia was presented to us in her urn. We were all very thankful and happy to have her back in our arms. We paid the bill and started our drive back home.

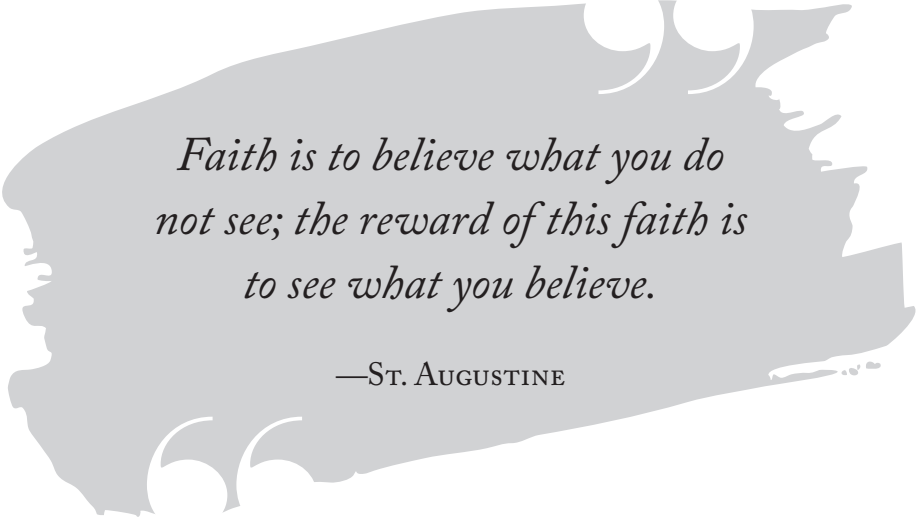
On the drive back we were all still sad but in better spirits. We started to discuss how difficult and traumatic this was for us, having never gone through this before. We talked about how disappointing it would have been if we had to wait four to six weeks to receive her remains back. How awful it would have been if we had to have her remains mailed back to us in a metal tin. How unsatisfied we were with the information we'd received over the phone and internet. And how inconvenient the whole process was. The discussion about our disappointment tapered off and turned to silence.

After some time, we had reached our exit off the highway and Marie broke the silence with an inappropriate beaming smile.

"You know," she said, "none of us are really happy with our career paths right now. Keith, you don't like your current sales job, I don't like my current accounting job, and Leon, you have some regrets over China. Maybe Felicia is giving us our answer. Maybe she is giving us one Final Gift! It's the idea to start our own business to help families like us through this."

"You know, Marie, you might be right!" I said. "And that's a great name for a business—Final Gift."

And that's when it all started. We didn't realize it yet, but that's when our lives all changed forever.

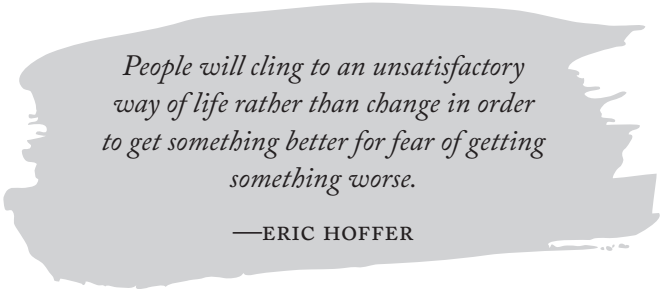


*Faith is to believe what you do
not see; the reward of this faith is
to see what you believe.*

—ST. AUGUSTINE

SAYING HELLO

The Courage to Dream



People will cling to an unsatisfactory way of life rather than change in order to get something better for fear of getting something worse.

—ERIC HOFFER

LATER THAT EVENING I WAS RELAXING on the couch thinking about Marie's idea, and the more I thought about it the more excited I became. Wouldn't it be great to have our own business? But that would be a lot of work. I was a manufacturing executive with an engineering background. What did I know about starting my own business? Sure, I had always considered myself a businessman, but I was an executive making business decisions for

a company that was already in business. I was managing a small part of a larger organization. That's a lot different than taking a simple idea and turning it into a thriving business that could support my family. I made a really good living. Starting a small business couldn't possibly pay our bills, and we practically lived paycheck to paycheck. Starting a business that wasn't going to be profitable on day one could never work. We would starve and lose our home.

Over the years, I have worked with many successful manufacturing business owners who started out small and grew over time. All of them were doing very well now after years of tireless effort and hardship. I don't ever remember any of them who said it was easy. Actually, what I do remember is them telling me how hard it was. How much time they had to put into it and mortgaging everything they owned in the hopes that it would someday work. That's a big risk for someone with a family who depended on them. What if it failed? Everyone would say: "That was stupid. What were they thinking? They had great jobs and they threw it all away for such a bad business idea."

But then I started to think, what if it was successful? How great would that be? Though there was a lot of risk, if it worked, the potential would be limitless. I would no longer have to put up with the corporate life and its challenges and we could build something really special for our family's future and create a legacy. So, I decided what was the harm in investigating this a little further when I had some time after work in the evening.

Marie joined me on the couch and asked what I was watching on TV. I said that I wasn't really watching anything because I just turned it on when I started to daydream about starting our own business. "You know, that was a great idea you had today, and what a great name for it— Final Gift."

"You should look into it," she said. "What do we have to lose?"

"Everything," I said.

"Well, we will never know until we try. What's the harm in looking into it a little? This house feels so empty without Felicia, and I really miss her, Leon. What are we going to do? It has only been a day and I can't stand not having her here with us."

"I know, Marie. Every time I try to think of something else a wave of emotion just comes over me and I get very sad again. It's terrible. It's going to take a long time for it to get better if it ever does. We were so lucky to have such a good dog. I keep wanting to feed her or take her outside. Like right now, we would be feeding her and getting ready to take her out one last time before bed."

"What would you think about getting another pet, Leon? I know that we just lost her but she was so loved. I think she would want us to share that love with another pet. I really think that's what she would want. We wouldn't be replacing her, just sharing our love with another pet. That's what she would want. She knew how lucky she was and how much we loved her."

"I don't know, Marie. Don't you think we should give it some time?"

"How much time is enough, Leon?"

“I don’t know. Let’s sleep on it. I’m going to get ready for bed—are you coming?”

“Yes, I’ll be right up.”

The next morning, we got up early. It was Sunday and Chelsea and Kayleigh were at their mom’s. We shared alternating weekends. I didn’t have to take Felicia out so there was no rush to get out of bed, which was very weird. We couldn’t even remember the last time that had happened. I asked Marie what she wanted to do for the day. We normally had a lot of errands to take care of on Sundays but she surprised me and said, “Why don’t we go to breakfast and then look for some puppy places to go to?”

“Okay, I would like that,” I said.

So, we jumped into our three-year-old Nissan Maxima that already had over 100,000 miles on it and started off for the day on our journey for a new family member to help us heal from our loss. Our first stop was a little disappointing. The breeder’s facility was not what we expected. It was a little run-down and we did not make a connection with any of the available puppies. We were concerned that the facility’s lack of attention could have spilled over to the puppies and resulted in a lack of social development or other health issues. The pups looked like they spent most of their time in their crates.

Our second stop was about an hour from the first so we had a lot of time to discuss things. Most of the conversation was focused on Felicia and the idea of “Final Gift” that she had given us. The more we discussed it, the more it made sense to us. We really had

been unhappy with the options we were offered and we knew that we couldn't be alone. There had to be many people who were unhappy as well. Marie asked what the first step should be to get things started and I suggested that I should do some research to see how many providers of the service were currently in the area and maybe talk to some of the local veterinary clinics to see if they were happy with the services that were being provided to them for their clients.

We arrived at our second stop and were happy to find a larger selection of pups and a nicer facility. It was obvious when we arrived that we were in a better place to find a new family member. A helpful staff explained the rules of interacting with the pups. If we saw a puppy that we wanted to get to know a little better, we had to contact the staff and they would bring the puppy to a private room where we could have some playtime with the dog. We had a lot of fun interviewing a few of the pups but didn't make that special connection with each other. It was time to leave and go to our last stop for the day.

I remembered that special connection that I made with Felicia when Marie first introduced me to her. It was kind of unusual to me because I remember thinking that she made eye contact with me and I felt like I could see into her soul through her eyes. It was very special and I always felt like that when we saw each other every day. I could read her through her eyes. I could always figure out how she felt by looking into her eyes. It seemed like she could do the same with me as well. She was always there for you when

things were a little tough and you were down. Not sure how she knew, but she did.

When we made it back to the car, I asked Marie what the name of our next stop was.

She said it was a place called the Dog House.

“Sounds appropriate,” I said.

Off we went. Once again, the conversation went back to Final Gift. “You know what might be helpful, Marie, is a book about how to start a business. Why don’t I pick up a book in the business section at the bookstore this week? Maybe that will give us some guidance on how to get started.

“I don’t know where I’m going to find the time to do this with everything going on at work, though. I hope we get an agreement on the financing we were looking for. So much has happened at home since I left work the other day. I feel like it has been forever since I’ve been there.”

I usually went in every Saturday for at least a few hours, but this was a holiday weekend. Felicia had passed just after Christmas and we had scheduled a brief shutdown between the two holidays. I was really uncomfortable about how I’d left things there after the meeting ended. It wasn’t like me to drop everything and walk away with so many loose ends at such an important time but I had no idea any of this was going to happen—and of all days to have to leave early at work. I hope Pat did okay with the bankers after I left.

Pat was my boss and one of the owners of the company. He was

the one who really pushed for hiring me. The other two owners were more interested in hiring a die casting expert to manage the facility, but Pat had the final decision-making authority. Pat's argument was that the reason they were in the predicament they were in was because they had too many so-called experts running the operations over the years. They needed a fresh set of eyes and ideas in the business to break the old paradigms of the organization. Pat was impressed with my accomplishments running much larger organizations that employed some of the latest manufacturing techniques and thought that my experience would be of more value in their organization than another die casting expert.

I later found out that Pat had many other interests and business ventures he was involved in. The only reason he was getting involved with this particular business again was because he had to come back into it to try and save it. I think he knew it was too late but was willing to try. He was a very smart man and I grew to admire him for his business intellect. I considered Pat to be one of the most influential mentors in my professional life, but unfortunately over the years, I would learn he was not to be trusted.

As we approached the address, I could see a big white sign with red lettering that read "The Dog House." It was a dangerous place to get to because of its location on a very busy two-lane road with fast-moving traffic. We had to exit quickly into a small parking lot beside the building without getting rear-ended from slowing down to make the exit. The building was a large, white ranch-

style home that had been gutted and converted into a commercial property. I could not believe the amount of people visiting this place. I was a little ashamed because my initial thought went right to Final Gift. These people are all going to buy a puppy and need the services from Final Gift someday, I thought. I really felt bad for thinking that way but it was a harsh reality. They would all need someone to care for their deceased love one. I was beginning to look at everything pet related as an engineering project, projecting numbers, developing equations for average pet life expectancy, and so on. I had never thought about this as a business. I had never thought of losing our own pet.

We walked in the Dog House's puppy-holding area. This place was set up a little differently. They had all the puppies in puppy playpens that you could see through. There were eight or ten different pens and you could see puppies running and playing all over the place. It was hard to keep your eyes on one particular pup because there were so many running around. Big ones, small ones, black ones, white ones, loud ones, and quiet ones—they were everywhere.

There was one dog pen that had a litter of light apricot miniature poodles in it. We were partial to miniature poodles because Felicia was a miniature poodle mixed breed. There were eight of them all running around chasing each other and biting the newspaper bedding, except for one. He was just sitting in the corner on his hind legs. He was in a position that made him look like he had a big butt. Sitting tall with a big roly-poly gut sticking

out. He wasn't lazy or anything. I just think he was saying look at those silly brothers and sisters of his eating paper and carrying on like a bunch of wacky dogs. Then he rolled up slowly off his hind legs and took a few steps forward, trying to resist the temptation of joining his siblings, when he turned and looked at us.

Those eyes—that's him, I said to myself. "Let's get the kennel attendant over here so we can meet him." I had that same feeling that I had when I met Felicia; I could see his soul. I already knew this beautiful little guy.

One of the employees came over and took him out of the pack for us and brought us to a private area to meet him. We immediately felt a connection with him, but Marie felt that we should at least try to let Keith, Chelsea, Kayleigh, and our grandson Brenden meet him before we made a final decision. It was getting late and they were getting ready to close. We asked the attendant how much he was and if they were open the next day. He said they were and took our little buddy back to the dog pen. It was very hard to leave him there but everything was happening so fast. We had just lost Felicia and we were thinking of a new puppy; maybe we were moving too fast?

That evening we called Keith and told him about the puppy we had met that day and how we were very torn about starting over with a new puppy. He was all for getting another puppy and offered to go and meet him the next day with Brenden. We called Chelsea and Kayleigh and shared our day with them as well, and they also seemed excited about the prospect of a new puppy.

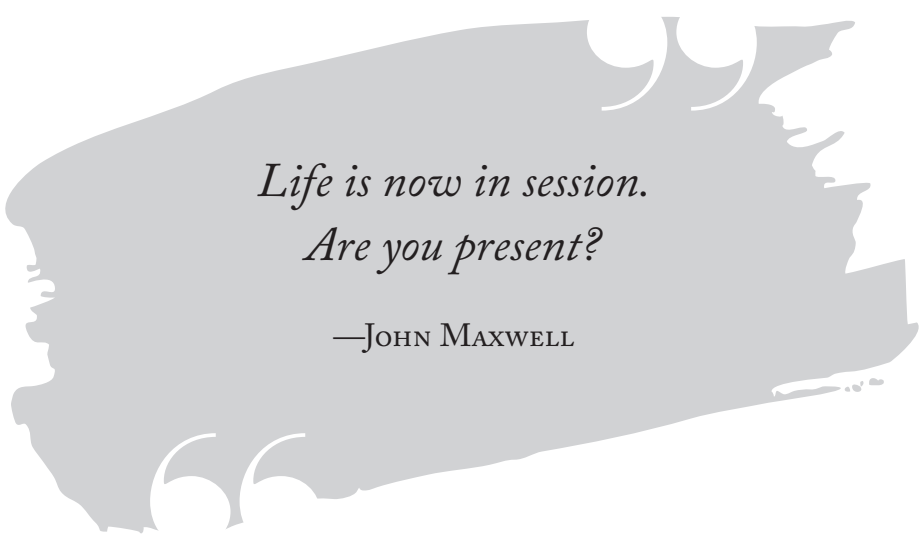
The remainder of that evening was spent debating whether or not the timing was right. We felt bad and almost guilty for becoming attached to another dog so quickly. We still had an empty feeling without Felicia, but we felt a little better when we met the pup at the Dog House earlier that day. Deep down I knew it was time. That puppy had already stolen our hearts. Felicia knew how lucky she was and would want us to share our love with another lucky dog.

The next morning, we were all in the car with a check in hand for \$800 to pick up our new puppy if all went well. We arrived and asked the attendant to see the puppy we were visiting with at closing last night. He brought him to us and that was it: we all fell in love with him. We started to talk about what to name him, and once again Marie didn't disappoint. She said, "Let's call him Karrot, with a K!"

"Why Karrot with a K?" we asked.

"Because he is a light apricot color, almost a redhead, carrot top. And he is as precious as twenty-four karat gold—Karrot."

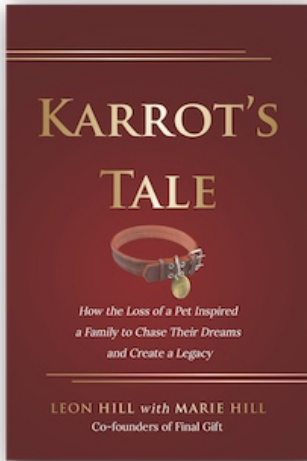
So that was his name. We paid for him and brought him home with us. Little did we know that he would play such a large role in the success of our business. Little did we know how much love he would bring to our lives. None of us at this point knew that the inspiration Felicia and Karrot were bringing into our lives would take all of our combined experiences, education, and training and turn it into an amazing business that would change our lives forever.



Life is now in session.

Are you present?

—JOHN MAXWELL



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