



Dog Church

by Gail Gilmore

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Does saving a life always mean preserving it, or does it sometimes mean letting go? When Gail Gilmore's beloved dog Chispa is diagnosed with Canine Cognitive Dysfunction, her first instinct is to fight for Chispa's life; to do everything possible to bring the symptoms of this neurologically debilitating condition under control.

But treatments fail, and Chispa's symptoms worsen. Faced with many emotionally complicated questions and difficult ethical decisions, Gail repeatedly visits the one place where she believes she might find the spiritual guidance and wisdom needed to make the best choice for Chispa—a tiny, extraordinary church in St. Johnsbury, Vermont called the Dog Chapel. Within the simple beauty of the chapel, its walls deeply layered with overlapping photographs and anonymous notes from thousands of

previous visitors to dogs loved and lost, Gail seeks and eventually finds both answers and peace in the wise and loving words of the unknown people she comes to consider her tribe.

A story of unconditional love and devotion, *Dog Church* is also a story of finding comfort in faith and the ways in which the emotional threads of love and grief can bind complete strangers together for brief moments in time in ways that are ultimately life-changing.

From the Author

Sometimes, one small decision made, one set of plans changed, prevents us from closing the door on what was meant to be. After deciding not to go on a planned trip to Disneyworld and choosing instead to vacation on a little-known Caribbean island, my path crossed with that of an abandoned dog on a very long beach and that encounter changed my life. Mired in grief over the still-fresh loss of my dog Comet, this new dog pulled me closer to happiness each day. My spouse and I brought her back to Boston with us. She had a new name, Chispa, and a new life. And after a while, I, too, had a new life—or a new lease on my old life, anyway. I marveled at the way Chispa's joyfulness had restored my own sense of joy, something I didn't think possible after losing Comet. When Chispa became ill with Canine Cognitive Dysfunction, all I could think about was saving her, as she'd saved me. It would take many false starts, but eventually I came to understand what saving this precious dog-life really meant.

Discussion Questions

1. What do we owe to those who have, in some way, saved us?
2. What do you think of Gail's search for the answers to her questions in the words of others? Would she have been better off looking for those answers solely within herself?
3. Discuss the ways in which Chispa's illness affects the household. How does one make space for illness in the midst of life's responsibilities and occasional chaos?
4. The book is broken up by anonymous reflections on the "words of dog," each of which appears on one of the seven stained-glass windows in the Dog Chapel: play, friend, joy, faith, peace, trust, and love. Why do you think the author structured the book in this way?



5. At one point, Gail refers to her ability to choose euthanasia for her cognitively impaired dog as a “gift,” one she wishes her father-in-law had been offered during his long and difficult struggle with dementia. What are your thoughts on this statement? Do you agree with Gail? Why or why not?
6. What does it mean to be a good and moral steward of a companion animal’s life? Did Gail do right by Chispa? Why or why not?
7. What was it about the letters from veterinarian Joy Lucas that finally enabled Gail to make the decision to let Chispa go?
8. Do you agree with Gail’s conclusion that the only way to save Chispa’s life was to release her to the next life?
9. Why does society tend to minimize the death of our animal family members and the associated grief? What could religious communities do to better support members experiencing this kind of loss?

About the Author

Gail Gilmore is a career advisor at Harvard University’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences, and a volunteer for Missing Dogs Massachusetts. She lives in the Boston area with her spouse and two Puerto Rican rescue dogs. Dog Church is her first book.