

THE DOG WHO HELPED ME FIND MY WAY HOME

George Dewiliby

The day before Wilson died, life still felt familiar. I had no idea that the following morning, Heather and I would be facing one of the most difficult decisions we would ever have to make.

On March 26, 2025, we had to let him go.

Wilson was our yellow Labrador, and for nearly nine years he had been part of practically everything we did. I loved that dog with everything I had. I wanted another morning with him, another walk, another evening with him sleeping beside us. But everything changed so suddenly, and we found ourselves facing a decision I would have given almost anything not to make.

We chose to let Wilson go because we didn't want him to suffer. I understood why we had to make that decision. What I wanted for myself and what I believed he needed were no longer necessarily the same thing. As much as every part of me wanted to bring him home, I couldn't allow my need to keep him beside me to become the reason he endured more pain.

I understood that.

But understanding didn't make it any easier to live with.

I never knew that doing the right thing could hurt that badly.

I've since written a book called Learning to Heal Through the Dogs Who Loved Us. Thousands of copies have made their way into the hands of readers, veterinary clinics have begun bringing it into their practices, and I've received messages from people telling me how much the words have helped them through the loss of a dog they loved.

But there's something about that book I want to share with you, because while I was writing words to help other people find their way through grief, I was still desperately trying to find my own way through it.

And much of that journey happened in Colorado.

Heather and I came to Montrose from Florida for work. It was our first travel assignment outside Florida, and neither of us could have imagined how much this beautiful state would eventually change our lives. We've been here for more than a year, experiencing the changing seasons, exploring the mountains, and discovering places so magnificent that sometimes I struggle to find words worthy of what we're seeing. Eventually, we decided to make Montrose our permanent home.

But something else was happening while we were discovering Colorado. Something I didn't fully understand at the time.

I was beginning to find my way through losing Wilson.

I remember going to Silverton with Heather for her birthday. It was autumn, and I don't think I could have chosen a more beautiful place to be.

Imagine mountains rising thousands of feet into a sky so blue it seems freshly painted, their slopes covered with

enormous forests of aspens in colors so brilliant that sunlight passing through the leaves makes entire mountainsides appear illuminated from within. There are yellows that seem to hold the warmth of the sun itself, oranges as deep as glowing embers, great stretches of amber and copper, and touches of red scattered among the darker greens of the evergreens. Higher still, the peaks rise beyond the forests, their exposed rock and early snow standing against the extraordinary blue of the sky.

And when the wind moves through those aspens, thousands upon thousands of leaves begin trembling and turning, each catching the sunlight for an instant before giving it to another. Entire hillsides seem to ripple with gold, as though the mountains themselves are moving beneath the trees. From a distance, it looks as though someone has taken an enormous brush, dipped it into every beautiful color imaginable, and painted across the mountains without once worrying whether the result might be too extravagant. I remember thinking that God must have painted those mountains Himself. Even that comparison seemed inadequate.

But there I was, standing among some of the most beautiful scenery I'd ever seen, with Heather beside me, and suddenly I thought about Wilson.

I wished he could have been there.

And what began as a thought became something I could feel throughout my body. That familiar ache settled into the pit of my stomach, my chest tightened, and my shoulders seemed to draw upward as though my body were preparing itself for something painful. I tried to take a breath and

enjoy the mountain air, but the memory of losing him had reached a place inside me that was still terribly wounded.

That's something I think people who have experienced tremendous loss will understand. Grief doesn't always wait until you're home alone, looking at pictures or remembering the day someone died. Sometimes it finds you in the middle of something wonderful. The world around you hasn't changed. The mountains are still beautiful, the sunlight is still moving through the trees, and the people you love are still beside you. But for a little while, the absence of someone you wish were there can become larger than everything your eyes are seeing.

I didn't want to stop missing Wilson. I wanted him back. And there were moments when enjoying something beautiful without him felt almost like another kind of goodbye.

But standing among those mountains, I began imagining what Wilson might have said if he could have spoken to me.

In that familiar voice I still carry inside my heart, I could almost hear him saying:

"Dad, I know you keep going back to the morning you lost me. You've gone over everything that happened, wondering whether there was something you could have seen sooner or some way we might have had more time. But why does that one morning get to tell you what our whole life was?

"Do you remember how many mornings there were when you woke up and I was there? How many times you came home and I was waiting? How many nights we fell asleep knowing we'd be together again when morning came?

Those days were my life, Dad. I didn't know they were becoming memories you'd someday give anything to return to. I was just happy to be living them with you.

"You keep remembering the day you couldn't save me. I wish you could remember all the days when you gave me everything I needed. A home. A family. A place where I belonged. Nearly nine years of never having to wonder whether I was loved.

"Please don't make the worst day of your life responsible for telling you what the rest of our life meant. I had thousands of beautiful days with you before that one, Dad. I wish you could remember them the way I got to live them."

I thought about those words for a long time.

I had nearly nine years of beautiful memories with Wilson, yet there were times when I could barely reach them without passing through the day he died. I could remember him running through the park, sleeping beside me, or doing something that made us laugh, but almost immediately my mind would carry me back to the decisions we'd made and the moments I wished I could change.

That final day had become more than one memory among thousands. It was demanding that every other memory pass through it.

And there, surrounded by mountains dressed in the most extraordinary colors I'd ever seen, I began understanding that Wilson's life deserved to be remembered for more than the pain of losing him. I could miss him terribly and still allow myself to love what was in front of me. Enjoying a beautiful moment didn't mean I was leaving him behind.

Perhaps those mountains weren't asking me to put my grief away. Perhaps they were giving me somewhere beautiful to begin carrying it differently.

Then there was Telluride.

Heather and I have spent time there in different seasons, and it's remarkable how completely the mountains transform. We've ridden the gondola high above the valley when snow covered the surrounding peaks and again when the warmer months revealed the deep greens of the forests beneath us. In winter, the mountains rise like enormous sculptures of snow and stone, their white ridges sharply defined against the blue sky. In the warmer seasons, forests climb the slopes, meadows open between the trees, and distant peaks stretch toward the horizon until the farthest ones seem to disappear into the sky.

As the gondola carries you higher, the buildings and roads become smaller, the valley opens beneath you, and new mountain ranges seem to appear behind the ones you were admiring only moments earlier. You find yourself looking in one direction, then another, almost afraid that if you spend too much time enjoying one view, you'll miss something equally beautiful somewhere else. Yet of all the things I remember about Telluride, there's one that has nothing to do with the mountains.

I remember Heather laughing.

After Wilson died, so much of my attention had been consumed by my own grief that I sometimes forgot how deeply his loss had affected her, too. She had loved him, cared for him, and shared those same years with him. She knew the empty places in our home just as I did. And there

we were, high above one of the most beautiful valleys I'd ever seen, experiencing something wonderful together.

I thought about Wilson again, and I could almost imagine him saying:

"Dad, listen to Mom laughing. I remember that sound, too. It was part of our home, part of the life we all shared. And now you're hearing it in one of the most beautiful places you've ever been, but part of you is afraid to enjoy it because I'm not there.

"I know you wish I could have come with you. But Mom is still there, Dad. She's standing beside the same man I loved, and she's learning how to live without me, too. The two of you gave me a beautiful life together. You didn't stop being a family when my life ended.

"Please don't feel that you have to keep sadness between you and happiness to prove how much you miss me. I already knew how much I meant to you. I knew it every day I was alive. Hold Mom's hand. Listen to her laugh. There are beautiful years ahead of you, and nothing about enjoying them will ever take away the years we had together."

Grief can become so consuming that we begin measuring our lives by what is no longer there. We become so familiar with the absence that sometimes we fail to recognize the people who are still sharing the journey with us.

I couldn't bring Wilson back into those moments. But I could bring everything his love had taught me into the life Heather and I were continuing to build.

And I could hold her hand and enjoy hearing her laugh.

Then came Glenwood Springs.

We've ridden the rapids there, feeling the raft rise and fall as the current carried us through stretches of rushing water. The river surges around enormous stones, climbs into white crests, crashes against itself, and gathers again in deep currents of green and white. You hear the water before you reach the next rapid, that unmistakable roar announcing something powerful ahead. Then the raft begins moving differently beneath you, the current quickens, and suddenly you're surrounded by spray and rushing water, holding on, paying attention, and feeling an excitement that reaches somewhere deeper than the moment itself.

And there are quieter stretches, too, where the river settles and becomes a moving reflection of the mountains above it. I've thought about how that water began as snow resting quietly upon distant peaks, gathering into streams as the seasons changed, and eventually becoming a river powerful enough to shape the very landscape through which it travels. There is something magnificent about a force that can be so peaceful in one moment and so powerful in the next.

But what I remember most is how exciting it felt to be out there experiencing it.

For a while after Wilson died, I had been living almost as though I were afraid to become too happy. Not because I didn't want happiness, but because I knew how quickly something wonderful could be taken away. And when you've experienced a loss that affects you that deeply, sometimes you become afraid of enjoying life again. Happiness can begin feeling almost like a betrayal of the one you've lost.

And there on the river, I thought about Wilson.

I could almost hear him saying:

“Dad, you keep wishing we’d had more time together. I understand. But sometimes I wish you could see how much time we actually had.

“I never needed every day to be extraordinary. I didn’t need you to take me somewhere special or give me something new to make my life wonderful. Some of my happiest moments were the ones you hardly thought about. Being near you. Hearing you come home. Knowing where I belonged when the day was over.

“You were always thinking about giving me a good life, Dad. And while you were doing that, I was already living one.

“Don’t let the fear of another goodbye take away the days you haven’t lived yet. Nothing you do today can change how much time we had together. But you can still decide how fully you’ll experience the time that’s in front of you.

“You gave me a life I didn’t have to be afraid to enjoy. I hope someday you can give yourself that same kindness.”

I thought about how much a dog can teach us without ever speaking a word.

Wilson didn’t spend our years together worrying about the day we’d have to say goodbye. He didn’t measure our time together by how much longer it might last. He lived the life we shared, finding happiness in being with the people he loved.

And as that river carried us forward, I began realizing that I couldn’t protect myself from every future loss by refusing to

experience happiness now. All I would accomplish was allowing the pain of one goodbye to take even more of the life I still had.

Then there's the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

There are places in Colorado where the mountains seem to reach endlessly toward the heavens. At the Black Canyon, the earth does something entirely different. It opens beneath you, revealing tremendous walls of dark stone descending toward the Gunnison River far below. Sunlight reaches some of those walls while others remain buried in deep shadow, making the canyon appear almost impossibly immense. The rock is marked by fractures, ledges, and bands of lighter stone, each telling a small part of a history far older than anything we've built upon the land above it.

From the rim, the river seems almost too distant to have played such an important role in shaping the landscape. Yet there it is, continuing its journey through the depths, its water having worked with the forces of nature over immense stretches of time to help create the magnificent canyon before you. And in July of 2025, fire changed portions of this extraordinary place. Trees and vegetation burned, leaving scars across parts of the landscape. Some areas were damaged while others survived, and the land began the long process of recovery that follows such an event. But the canyon itself remained magnificent. The enormous walls still rose above the river, sunlight still moved across the stone, and the Gunnison continued flowing through the depths.

I thought about how much that reminded me of what I was experiencing.

There was a time when I desperately wanted my life to return to exactly what it had been before Wilson died. I wanted the sounds of our home back, the routines we shared, and the comfort of knowing he was there. I wanted another morning when loving him didn't have to include missing him.

I wanted the life I'd had, not a different version of it.

And somewhere in my thoughts, considering that enormous canyon and everything it had endured, I could almost hear Wilson telling me:

"Dad, I know you want everything back the way it was. I know there are mornings when you'd give anything to open your eyes and discover that none of this ever happened. You want to hear me moving through the house. You want to see me in the places where I used to sleep.

"But look at what you're doing to yourself when you keep trying to become the man you were before I died. That man had me beside him. He hadn't yet experienced what it would feel like to lose me. Of course you can't be exactly the same. We shared almost nine years of our lives together. How could something that meaningful end without changing you?

"Your life was changed when I came into it, Dad. You became someone different because you loved me. You learned things about patience, responsibility, companionship, and love that you might never have understood in quite the same way without me.

"Why would you believe that all those beautiful changes disappeared on the day I died?

“You don’t have to return to the person you were before you lost me. Carry what our love taught you into the life you’re building now. Let it become part of the way you love Mom, the way you see the world, and the way you help people who are hurting.

“I know you would never have chosen a life without me. But you can still make something beautiful from the life you have, and nothing about that means our life together mattered any less.”

I think about those words differently now than I might have when I first lost him.

Because there’s a tremendous difference between finding a way to live after something and becoming exactly the person you were before it happened. Some experiences change us permanently.

I will never be the man who hasn’t lost Wilson. That part of my life is gone, and no amount of beauty in the world can give it back to me.

But I can still be the man who loved him.

And perhaps that was one of the most important things I was beginning to discover. I could carry the pain of losing him without allowing it to destroy everything his love had given me.

There have been other beautiful moments here, too.

We’ve traveled near Grand Junction, where the Colorado National Monument reveals an entirely different landscape of red sandstone, enormous rock formations, and deep canyons. We’ve watched deer near our home in Montrose,

their movements so gentle and unhurried that simply seeing them can change the feeling of an afternoon. We've seen bighorn sheep navigating mountain slopes so steep that I can hardly imagine finding a place to put my own feet. And recently, near Silverton, Heather photographed an enormous dark moose, a magnificent animal whose size and presence seemed perfectly suited to the strength of the mountains surrounding him.

I find myself getting excited about experiences like that in a way I don't remember feeling when I was younger. And sometimes, watching an animal or discovering something beautiful, I think about Wilson and how much loving him changed the way I experience the world.

I can almost imagine him saying, "Dad, look at how much love you still have in your heart for animals. You thought losing me might take that away from you, but it didn't. You still see something beautiful when you look at them. You still care. You still get excited. I had my own place in your life, and nothing you love after me can ever take that away. You don't have to close the part of your heart that loved me to keep my memory safe. Everything we had is already ours."

And then there's the night sky.

The people I work with in the Cath Lab already know I have a habit of getting excited about things like this. I'll be outside at night, look up, and notice something shining so brightly that I have to stop and take a picture. I remember looking at one particularly brilliant light and thinking I'd never seen a star shine quite like that. It turned out to be Venus, which isn't a star at all. And naturally, once I discovered what it was, I had to share it with somebody.

So I'll send a picture to our little Cath Lab group chat. A couple of people will chuckle at me. Others will tell me how beautiful it is. We've done the same thing with the moon, especially on nights when it appears so large and clear that I feel as though I could almost reach toward it. I suppose they probably wonder why I get so excited about something that's been hanging above our heads our entire lives.

But that's exactly what fascinates me.

Away from the brighter lights, the darkness above these mountains becomes something extraordinary. Stars appear in such numbers that the spaces between them seem to disappear. Some shine with a sharp, brilliant clarity while others gather into faint, distant clouds of light. Under the darkest skies, the Milky Way stretches across the heavens, its countless stars mingling into a pale, luminous band that reaches across an enormous portion of the sky. Below it, the mountains settle into darkness, their great ridgelines becoming faint silhouettes beneath a sky so vast that even those magnificent mountains seem small by comparison.

And sometimes, when I'm standing there looking up, I think about Wilson.

I wish he could see those mountains. I wish he could be there when the deer appear near our home. I wish I could share another evening with him, another morning, another simple moment that didn't have to be anything special because he was there.

And in my heart, I can almost imagine him saying:

“Dad, every time you see something beautiful, you wish I could be there. I know. But have you ever thought about why you want to share those moments so badly?”

“Remember how you used to come home and want to find me? Remember how something as simple as hearing your voice could make my whole world exciting? You didn’t have to tell me what happened during your day. I was just happy you were there.

“And now, when you see something wonderful, you still have that same excitement. You want someone else to experience it. You take a picture, you send it to your friends, and you hope they’ll see a little of what made you stop and look.

“Dad, that’s the same heart that loved me. It’s still reaching outward. It’s still finding things worth loving. And even though I can’t be in those pictures with you, I helped shape the person who’s taking them.

“You wish you could give me one more beautiful day. I wish you could understand how many beautiful days you already gave me.”

And perhaps that’s why I send those pictures.

When I see something beautiful, keeping it to myself almost feels impossible. I want somebody else to see it, too.

And I suppose that’s what I’ve been trying to do with my writing.

I’ve spent nearly thirty years working in cardiology, and I’ve seen what happens when the physical heart needs help. I’ve watched physicians restore blood flow through blocked

arteries using balloons and stents, and I've cared for patients whose chests carried the unmistakable scar of open-heart surgery. You can look at that scar and know something significant happened inside that person's chest. You may not know their entire story, but there's visible evidence of what their body has endured.

When Wilson died, I sometimes felt as though I should have been carrying a scar like that myself.

If you'd looked at my chest, there was nothing to see. No incision, no stitches, nothing to explain the ache beneath my ribs or the way my stomach tightened whenever my mind returned to the morning we had to let him go. I could put on my scrubs, walk into the Cath Lab, and help care for someone whose heart was in trouble. I could do the work I'd spent nearly thirty years learning to do. And no one looking at me would necessarily know how much I was hurting.

In *The Light I Had to Fight For*, I wrote about how the world sees the scrubs but not the scars beneath them. I was writing about the emotional experiences healthcare workers carry, the patients we remember, and the things that follow us home long after our shifts have ended. But losing Wilson gave that recognition another meaning in my own life. I knew what it was like to carry a wound that nobody could see, one that could begin hurting again in the middle of an otherwise beautiful day.

And when I began writing about Wilson, people could see the words. They could read them, feel the emotion behind them, and sometimes recognize something about their own lives that they'd never known how to explain. But what they couldn't see was how much of my own pain had gone into finding those words, or how many times I'd returned to the

same memories, trying to understand why one terrible day had become so much more powerful in my mind than nearly nine years of love.

For years, I'd helped physicians care for people's physical hearts. I knew what a balloon or a stent could accomplish when blood wasn't reaching the heart muscle the way it should. But there was nothing in that laboratory that could give me back Wilson, change the decision we'd made, or remove the guilt I was still carrying.

What I had was something I'd been using for nearly thirty years.

I had words.

And as I began writing about what was happening to me, I discovered that words could sometimes reach places I hadn't known how to reach any other way. They couldn't bring Wilson back. They couldn't change what had happened. But they helped me begin understanding why I was hurting, why certain memories kept returning, and why I could know I'd tried to do the right thing for him and still feel so much guilt afterward.

Most importantly, those words eventually helped me begin remembering more than the day he died.

I began finding my way back to the life we'd actually shared.

And when other people began reading those words, some of them told me they were finally finding language for feelings they'd been carrying themselves.

I'd spent nearly thirty years helping care for hearts I could see on a monitor and assist physicians in treating.

Wilson helped me discover another way my words might reach a hurting heart.

And perhaps that's the part of his legacy I'll always be most grateful for. A dog who never spoke a word in a language people could understand became the reason I found words that helped other people feel understood.

There's an entire section in *Learning to Heal Through the Dogs Who Loved Us* called *Wilson Speaks*. It's written from the perspective of what I imagine Wilson might say if he could tell the story of our life together from his side of the relationship.

And that part of the book took me back to something that happened years before Wilson was born.

We had lost another dog we loved deeply. Her name was Jordan. When Jordan died, I was heartbroken, and as I'd done so many times throughout my life, I wrote about what I was feeling. Those words eventually reached Denise McGill of Pointe Labradors, who recognized something in what I'd written.

She didn't simply see someone looking for another puppy. She saw someone who was grieving.

And she did something extraordinary.

She sent us Wilson.

In *Wilson Speaks*, I wrote about that moment from the perspective I imagined Wilson might have had. Denise hadn't merely sent us a puppy. She had sent us healing.

And that healing was Wilson.

He never replaced Jordan. He couldn't have. Jordan had her own place in our lives that no other dog could occupy. But Wilson brought new love into our home, new experiences, new memories, and nearly nine years of a relationship that would eventually change not only my life, but the lives of people who would come to know him through my writing.

And then, when his life ended, I found myself standing in the same kind of grief that had once brought him into my life.

Only this time, there wasn't another Wilson waiting to arrive.

And no one could give him back to me.

Of all the things I've imagined Wilson saying during our experiences in Colorado, there's one conversation I believe would mean more to me than any other. It's the conversation I needed most, because it returns to the part of our story I've struggled with more than anything else.

The morning I had to let him go.

After everything those mountains and rivers had helped me begin understanding, I kept returning to that morning, to the decision we made, and to the guilt I'd been carrying ever since.

And I imagine Wilson looking at me with those familiar eyes and saying:

"Dad, I know there's something you've been carrying that we haven't finished talking about.

“It’s the morning you had to let me go.

“You’ve gone back to that morning more times than you can count. You’ve remembered the decisions, questioned what you might have missed, and wondered whether there was some way you could have brought me home. I know how badly you wanted more time. I know that if wanting me to live could have kept me here, you would never have had to say goodbye.

“But Dad, you’ve spent so much time judging yourself by the hardest decision you ever had to make that sometimes you’ve forgotten the man who was making it.

“That was the same man who had loved me every day of my life. The same man who wanted to protect me from everything he could. The same man who would have done anything to give me more time if it meant that time could still be good for me.

“You didn’t want to make that decision. I know that. You wanted to take me home. You wanted another night with me beside you and another morning when you could wake up and find me there.

“But when the moment came, you had to think about something more than what you wanted. You had to think about what I might have to endure if you tried to keep me longer.

“Dad, you keep asking whether you loved me enough to make the right decision at the end. I wish you could understand that the reason the decision hurt so terribly was because of how much you loved me all along.

"You weren't choosing between loving me and letting me go. You were being asked to make a decision about letting me go while loving me with everything you had.

"Please don't make yourself stand trial for the rest of your life over a decision you never wanted to face. Remember the years before it. Remember who you were to me, the life we lived, and the thousands of times you showed me what it meant to belong.

"You've spent so much time wishing you could have given me one more day that sometimes I think you've forgotten what you gave me during all the days we already had.

"You gave me my life with you, Dad.

"And when the time came that you couldn't give me the life you wanted me to have anymore, you still tried to do what was kindest for me, even though you knew you'd be the one left carrying the pain.

"Please don't spend the rest of your beautiful life punishing the man who loved me that much.

"I already knew I was loved.

"I need you to remember that, too."

I don't know that I can adequately describe what it feels like to write those words.

There are still times when I think about March 26, 2025, and feel the same ache I felt when we lost him. I still wish I'd had more time. I still wish the last morning of his life had never arrived.

But something began changing when I allowed myself to imagine how Wilson might have remembered our life together.

I had spent so much time looking at our story from the perspective of the man who lost him that I had almost forgotten to consider the life of the dog who had been loved by him.

Wilson didn't spend nearly nine years wondering whether I'd do everything perfectly. He spent those years as part of our family, living in a home where he belonged, receiving the care and affection we gave him, and returning that love in all the ways only he could.

I couldn't change the final day. I couldn't take away the pain of what we'd experienced. But I could begin learning not to allow that one day to become the measure of everything that came before it.

And that's where I want to turn this story toward you.

Because perhaps you're reading this tonight with a dog you've loved on your mind. Maybe you had to make the same kind of decision Heather and I made. Maybe your dog died suddenly, or after a long illness. Maybe you've been carrying the grief for years, but there are still mornings when something reminds you of them and you feel that familiar ache in your chest.

And perhaps you've been asking some of the same questions I asked.

Did I do enough? Did they know how much I loved them? Was there something I should have noticed? Did I make the right decision? How am I supposed to live without them?

I've imagined Wilson speaking to me so many times since he died. But tonight, after thinking about everything Colorado has helped me understand, I find myself imagining something else.

I wonder what Wilson might say to you.

Not because he knew your dog or lived the life you shared together, but because I think the perspective I found while writing *Wilson Speaks* might offer you something worth considering, too.

And if I could imagine him speaking from the other side, where the pain of his failing body no longer limits what he sees, I think he might say something like this:

"I know you're hurting. I know there's a dog you're missing, and I know there are parts of your life that don't feel the same without them.

"I wish you could see the life you shared from a different place than the one you're standing in right now.

"Because where you're standing, you can see the empty places. You can see where they used to sleep, where their bowl used to be, and the door they won't come running through again. You remember the last time you held them, the decisions you made, and all the things you wish could have happened differently.

"But what if you could see your story from where they stood?

"What if, instead of beginning with the day you lost them, you began with the day they became yours?

“Think about what their world was like with you in it. Think about the places they knew, the sounds they recognized, and the life that slowly became familiar because they were sharing it with you. They didn’t need to understand how much you loved them by measuring every sacrifice you made. They lived inside that love every day.

“And if you were the one who had to make the decision to let them go, I know how much you’ve questioned yourself. You wanted to protect them. You wanted more time. And when those two things could no longer be promised together, you were left facing a decision that hurt more than you ever imagined.

“But please don’t let the moment you had to say goodbye become the only evidence you use to judge the love you gave them.

“Go back farther.

“Go back to the years when they were healthy, when the days seemed endless, and when you had no reason to imagine how much you’d someday miss the very routines you were living. Remember the way they looked at you, the little things they did that made you laugh, and the comfort of knowing they were somewhere nearby.

“Remember the life they actually lived with you.

“If you lost them suddenly, I know there may be things you wish you’d had time to say. If you watched them grow old or become ill, I know there may be things you wish you could have changed. And if you had to make that final decision for them, I know there may be questions your heart continues asking long after your mind understands why.

“But none of those questions can tell the whole story of a life.

“The last day mattered. Of course it mattered. It was the day everything changed for you. But there were so many days before it when love was being given and received without anyone stopping to question whether it was enough.

“You don’t have to forget what happened at the end. You don’t have to stop missing them, and you don’t have to find another dog to fill the place they left behind.

“But please don’t believe that the only way to keep loving them is to keep returning to the moment you lost them.

“There’s an entire life waiting to be remembered.

“And perhaps, when you begin finding your way back to those memories, you’ll discover that the love you’re carrying was never confined to the years you were physically together.

“Your dog helped make you the person you are today. That doesn’t have to end because their life did.

“And when another beautiful moment comes along, when something makes you laugh or you find yourself enjoying a day you never expected to enjoy again, you don’t have to feel guilty.

“You aren’t leaving them behind.

“You’re living with what their love left inside you.”

I think if someone had offered me that perspective in the days after Wilson died, I might have begun understanding my grief differently much sooner.

And if you've lost a dog you loved, and there are still nights when you lie awake wishing you could change how their life ended, I want you to know something.

If you've questioned the decisions you made, struggled with guilt even though you were trying to do what was best, or found yourself unable to reach the beautiful memories because the pain of that final day keeps getting in the way, I understand more of that journey than I ever wanted to.

And if you've ever wondered how you're supposed to continue living a beautiful life when someone who made that life so beautiful is no longer beside you, I understand that, too.

I wrote this book for you.

Not because I can take away your grief or give you back the dog you're missing. I wish I could.

I wrote it because I know what it's like to have years of beautiful memories and still feel trapped inside one terrible day. I know how desperately I wanted someone to help me understand what I was feeling, and how much I wish I'd had those words when Wilson died.

And if something I've shared tonight has helped you see your dog's life through a different lens, there's so much more I want to share with you in the pages of *Learning to Heal Through the Dogs Who Loved Us*.

The book explores what happens before and after we lose an animal we love. It reaches into the questions that can follow us home from the veterinary clinic, the guilt that can remain after euthanasia, the pain of unexpected loss, and the difficult days when the rest of the world continues

moving while we're still trying to understand how to live without someone who had become part of almost everything we did.

But it also brings readers back to the life they shared. The mornings, the walks, the laughter, the companionship, and all the little things that made their dog different from every other animal in the world.

And there's another part of this journey that has come to mean a tremendous amount to me. It involves the veterinary professionals who help us through some of the most difficult days of our lives.

Since publishing the book, I've had people purchase copies for their own veterinarians. Some had read it and wanted the people who cared for their dogs to experience it themselves. Others hoped their veterinarian might find something in those pages that could help another family facing the same kind of loss.

Think about what that means. Someone receives a book that helps them understand their grief, then decides to place that same opportunity in the hands of someone who might be able to help dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other grieving families.

For a long time, I reached out to veterinary clinics myself. I wrote letters, sent emails, and explained why I'd written the book. But eventually, I realized there was a much simpler way to make these resources available.

I created an entire Veterinary Clinics section on my website.

If you know a veterinarian who helps families through euthanasia or end-of-life care, I would love for you to tell them about it.

They can visit georgedewiliby.com, select Veterinary Clinics from the menu at the top, and scroll to the information about complimentary review copies and comfort cards. There's a link to request materials by email. They simply provide their clinic details and mailing address so I can verify the practice and arrange shipment.

Any legitimate veterinary clinic is welcome to request a complimentary copy of *Learning to Heal Through the Dogs Who Loved Us*, along with comfort cards they can make available to grieving families. I simply verify that the request is coming from an actual veterinary practice before sending the materials.

There's no charge for the book or the comfort cards, no obligation to purchase additional copies, and no requirement to carry the book in their clinic. They don't even have to write back to tell me what they thought of it.

I just want them to have the opportunity to read it.

Because one veterinarian who discovers something helpful in these pages may be able to place that same opportunity in the hands of families who are facing the most difficult day of their dog's life.

Veterinary professionals do extraordinary work. They care for our animals through illness, help us understand difficult decisions, and sometimes guide us through the most heartbreaking goodbye we'll ever experience. Many provide grief resources and continue supporting families afterward.

But eventually, we have to go home.

And when we get there, the life we've known is still waiting, filled with routines that haven't yet learned what happened.

We walk into the kitchen at the time we'd normally prepare our dog's dinner and realize there's no reason to reach for their bowl. We hear a sound in another room and, for an instant, expect them to come around the corner. We wake in the morning and reach toward the place where they used to sleep, sometimes before we're fully awake enough to remember.

And there are nights when everyone else in the house is sleeping, but we're lying awake, going over the same terrible questions again.

That's the part of grief I wanted the book to reach.

And that's why the comfort cards mean so much to me.

A veterinarian can place one in a family's hands without knowing whether they'll ever use it. The family may not need it that day. They may not be ready to read anything for weeks. But if that time comes, they'll know there's somewhere they can turn.

I wish I'd had that opportunity when Wilson died.

If you'd like to read *Learning to Heal Through the Dogs Who Loved Us*, you can find personally signed paperback and hardback editions, along with an e-book, on my website:

<https://georgedewiliby.com>

And there's one more thing I'd like to ask, because it's something I don't usually do.

I rarely ask people to share what I write. I've always believed that if something I've written means enough to someone, they'll decide for themselves whether they want another person to read it.

But tonight, I've been thinking about how many people are experiencing the kind of grief I was carrying after Wilson died, and how many of them may not know that something like this book exists.

I've heard from readers who told me it helped them look at their grief differently, recognize feelings they couldn't explain, or begin remembering their dogs with more of the love that had filled their years together and less of the guilt that followed their final goodbye.

I wish I'd had something like that when I lost Wilson.

And I've been thinking that sharing this note can serve a purpose similar to placing one of those comfort cards in someone's hands.

If something I've written here has helped you, if Wilson's words have given you another way to think about the dog you've lost, or if you've already read the book and believe it could help someone else, would you consider sharing this?

You don't have to convince anyone to buy a book. You don't have to explain why they should read it. And it costs nothing to share a message that might reach someone who needs it.

Perhaps there's someone on your friends list who recently lost a dog and is struggling terribly. Perhaps there's someone who lost their dog years ago and still finds themselves returning to the same painful memories. Perhaps there's someone lying awake tonight, wondering

whether they made the right decision, who has never spoken those questions aloud because they don't know how to explain what they're feeling.

They may never have heard of me.

They may never have heard of Wilson.

But perhaps they'll recognize something in these words that helps them understand they aren't the only person who's ever felt this way.

And if they decide the book might help them, they'll know where to find it.

I think about Denise McGill of Pointe Labradors, who recognized my grief after I lost Jordan. She couldn't bring Jordan back. She couldn't take away everything I was feeling. But she gave us Wilson, and the love that followed changed my life.

I can't do for another grieving family exactly what Denise did for ours. And I wouldn't pretend that another animal, or a book, could replace the dog someone is missing.

But I can send something into the world that began with Wilson's love.

Words that might reach someone who needs them.

And perhaps you can help those words reach someone I could never reach on my own.

I've said before that I don't particularly care whether people remember my name long after I'm gone. But if they remember Wilson, that would mean something to me.

Because he changed my life while he was here.

And somehow, even after his life ended, he has continued changing it.

I never imagined that a yellow Labrador who spent nearly nine years being loved by our family would become part of the lives of people he never met, in places he never visited.

And I certainly never imagined that while I was trying to help other people through the pain of losing their dogs, I'd be finding pieces of my own healing among the mountains of Colorado.

But here we are.

Heather and I have made this beautiful state our home. There are still roads we haven't traveled, mountains we haven't seen in every season, and places waiting for us that I can't yet imagine.

And there are mornings when I look toward those mountains and feel fortunate just to be here.

I wish Wilson could see them with me.

But I think he would be happy knowing that after everything we've been through, I'm still finding beautiful things worth sharing with the world.

And if something his love taught me helps another person remember that the last day was never the whole life, then a little more of what Wilson gave me will have found its way to another heart.

That's why I keep writing.

And that's why I wrote this book.

Learning to Heal Through the Dogs Who Loved Us

<https://georgedewiliby.com>

— George Dewiliby

Read more. Help Wilson's story reach someone.

Personally signed paperback and hardback editions of Learning to Heal Through the Dogs Who Loved Us, along with the e-book and my other published book, are available at GeorgeDewiliby.com.

If you know someone who is missing a dog they love, please [share the Facebook post](#). Wilson's story may reach someone who needs it.