

The next day, I felt the familiar catch in my throat as Belker's family surrounded him. Shane seemed so calm, petting the old dog for the last time, that I wondered if he understood what was going on.

Within a few minutes, Belker slipped peacefully away. The little boy seemed to accept Belker's transition without any difficulty or confusion. We sat together for a while after Belker's death, wondering aloud about the sad fact that animal lives are shorter than human lives.

Shane, who had been listening quietly, piped up, "I know why."

Startled, we all turned to him. What came out of his mouth next stunned me—I'd never heard a more comforting explanation.

He said, "Everybody is born so they can learn how to live a good life—like loving everybody and being nice, right?" The four-year-old continued, "Well, animals already know how to do that, so they don't have to stay as long."