

Grieving pet owners comforted by 'supernatural' interactions

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Less than a week after her golden retriever Riley died, information studies Professor Jen Golbeck found him napping in her living room, "curled up like a croissant like he always was," on his red and gray-

fleece dog bed.

"It took me a second to be like, 'That's not right,'" she said. "And when I looked back, he wasn't there anymore."

Golbeck doesn't believe in ghosts, to be clear. But the moment was real for her—real enough to bring tears to her eyes then, and even now, as she recounts the story—just as similar encounters are for pet lovers around the world.

In a [paper](#) published in the journal *Anthrozoös*, the University of Maryland researcher analyzes supernatural visits reported by 544 [dog owners](#) on Twitter/X and Instagram, in response to a query she posted on her popular @GoldenRatio4 accounts that detail the adventures of her pack of golden retrievers.

About half were physical manifestations, such as hearing the click-click-click of nails across hardwood, feeling a little wet nose against their cheek or sensing a furry warm creature in the bed next to them. The other half were signs, like seeing butterfly or a rainbow (a callback to a popular poem about the loss of pets, "Over the Rainbow Bridge") or meeting the dog in a dream.

"Universally, these were peaceful interactions and almost universally comforting," she said, in contrast to research that shows paranormal experiences to be negative. "Psychologically, it was good for people."

Golbeck's interest in the topic is both personal and professional. Since she and her husband, Ingo Burghardt, started rescuing sick or older golden retrievers in 2017, she's lost nearly a dozen dogs. And as a computer scientist seeking to understand online radicalization, she's delved into psychology, wrapping up a master's degree on the topic this semester from Harvard University.

Research shows that "people who see ghosts of human deceased loved ones often refer to them as hallucinations," she said. "Scientifically, that's true. But at the same time, it feels so dismissive of the psychology of that experience."

In the case of Riley, Golbeck believes her guilt over his passing that brought him back, however fleetingly, into her life. He was 7 years old when she and Burghardt, rescued him. But it turned out he was suffering from [kidney failure](#) due to Lyme disease, and they had to put him down after he slowly declined, just nine months later.

"Losing a dog is always hard, but when you feel like you failed them in your responsibility to give them a gentle exit—we probably waited two or three days too long to euthanize him—it's just a crushing loss," she said.

Society gives pet owners few public outlets for grief, she said. While people get bereavement days for the death of a family member, discounted flights to travel to their funeral, or sympathy if they burst into tears weeks or months after, the same understanding doesn't extend to those who lose an animal. But research shows people form attachment bonds with their dogs, similar to those between mothers and children, Golbeck said.

"Don't just say, 'You can get another one!' You would never say that to someone who lost a friend," she said. "Giving people that space is really important."

More information: Jennifer Golbeck, "I Saw Her With My Heart": Supernatural Experiences and Continuing Bonds After the Death of a Dog, *Anthrozoös* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2024.2327174](https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2024.2327174)

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