Jackson: Cultivating community, the systemic nature of mutual tele

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Everyone knew Jackson. He was a big black labrador that lived behind a very small fence. Maybe that was the attraction, why people knew and loved him. He was so big and never jumped out. Kids on bikes, workmen in the next street, people walking by would stop and pat him. Jackson was very happy at home behind his little fence with his family and watching the goings on in the street.

After my mother died, one day I was feeling sad. I looked at my dog Hunter, an independent pit bull cross, and thought, you are not going to get this. I need Jackson. So, I went to where he was and put my face into his lovely warm body and cried. It was true. Jackson did understand. He was the perfect comforter.

When I got my dog Pippa as a tiny puppy, it was just before the first lockdown. I didn't want her to suddenly see the world after lock down and get a fright, so I put her in a wheelbarrow and took her round the block. Jackson was her first friend. He was four years old at the time and very gentle with his big body never hurting the little pup.

As time went on, I got to have Jackson come and stay at my house when his family went on holiday. My friends would hear I was looking after him and come round just to see the gentle giant. Everybody loved Jackson.

One little boy of eight would wait at the gate when Jackson was confined after surgery, asking to see him. After a few weeks he had had enough of the waiting and said to Gordon the owner, "I have known him for eight years. He is practically my dog you know." The little gang of kids on bikes would ride around the streets after school delighted if they saw Jackson or Pippa.

So Jackson was a community dog with his own family but dearly loved by many. It came as a shock to us when at the young age of eight he was diagnosed with aggressive cancer. His family and the neighbourhood only had a few days to get their heads around the idea before he died.

I like cried like many even though he wasn't my dog. I thought where can all that love go? I need to do something; it can't just be gone.

So when my friend arrived with the quarter of a sunflower head, I planted the seeds with an idea I would give a plant to everyone who loved Jackson.



A sunflower in Jackson's Avenue, my driveway.

At first I told no one. I just looked after the seedlings like I had never looked after a plant in all my life. I watched them break through the soil and lose their little hats, the seed case. I looked after them with sheep poo for fertiliser and guarded them from pests. Some were big and some not so big. I counted them to make sure there were enough.

Then when it was time, I told the family of Jackson. I told them of my plan to give everyone who loved him one and they came to select theirs. The thing that surprised me was everyone wanted their own sunflower. It wasn't just one for the household. In Jackson's house there were three family members so they each had their own sunflower as did the two ladies next door who helped me look after him at times.

I went visiting when the sunflowers were about two months old. I felt tentative knocking on people's doors and saying "here is a sunflower I grew for Jackson. You can have one because you loved him too." I gave them out with sheep poo and snail bait. Sometimes people didn't want the snail bait, but everyone wanted the sheep poo.

I planted sunflowers all up my driveway. I mulched them, fed them, watered them and sometimes very quietly sang to them. They grew and grew and grew. They were the biggest sunflowers I had ever seen. It was exciting to see the flowers emerging not only in my driveway but in other people's garden. It was like the yellow flower was a candle to his memory.

Then the talk began. People would say, "have you seen my sunflower, how big it is?" "Mine is just coming out." "We had to shelter ours from the wind." "Have you seen the one at … house. It is taller than the roof."

It was like the flowers bought a burst of happiness to all of us. People would gather round the driveway to look at Jackson's sunflowers and go see them at other houses. My friends who lived in other area of town sent photos when their sunflowers came out. The family were gathering photos of all Jackson's sunflowers.

One lady a few streets away had lost her husband. She came back from his tangi and said the sunflower had come out while they were away. She was comforted to see its yellow face.

People became excited about gathering the seeds and planting more. When the petals blew away the little boy next door wondered if I could find them and staple them back on. I told him he can have some seeds to grow his own and he was happy.

The owner of Jackson had the idea of digging up his front lawn and planting it in sunflowers next year and while his wife looked dubious, she was happy to go along with the idea.

I knew Jackson the big black Labrador we all loved was gone but some of the love he bought with him to a neighbour was carrying on. Jackson left

behind a more connected community of people who shared the sorrow of his passing and from that, a deeper connection with each other. For a psychodramatist, there was an enriching of the social atom of many and some social atom repair on the matter of loss and grieving.

There was mutually positive tele between neighbours as we shared our love of dogs and sunflowers. The spontaneous idea of growing flowers in his memory brought forth greater spontaneity, with shared photos made into a collage. Now, almost a year later, last year's seeds are being planted in gardens and passed on to people in other areas of New Zealand. I have received photos of the seedlings emerging from delighted new gardeners. Those not knowing how to grow seeds have consulted others and so the connections continue.