

# Sorry for your loss (yawn)

To me, the most mundane, unoriginal and programmed words uttered to someone who has lost someone else through death is, “Sorry for your loss.” Really? Is this the best we can think of?

Read any Facebook or social media post when someone dies, and those four words are the absolute most common you’ll see – words from people who are trying to say *something* yet have no better words to apply ... maybe something more distinctive, genuine and expressive.

Do you think the receiver even hears those routine words for what they’re supposed to express? I don’t; I think “sorry for your loss” is the most overused and empty phrase we can verbalize “at a time like this.”

Saying habitual words in the face of death is happenstance because the subject puts us at a disadvantage; those customary words, I suppose, may feel comfortable to some. Personally, I think we could be less robotic; we could take some time to devise comforting heartfelt and original words to write in a sympathy card or say during the visitation. (Look up a quote or phrase online if you’re not good with words.)

We actually don’t know *what* to say! We don’t know what to *do*! We certainly don’t know how to *act* standing in front of someone handling fresh grief – plus shock, anger, disbelief and the heap of emotions they are juggling.

I write this two days after my lifelong friend’s son died from a major heart attack. He was only 42 and left behind four young children and a wife whose lives are forever altered. I want to rush to my friend and hug her, yet give her space. I want to call her every hour, yet leave her alone. I want to text her hearts, emojis, words of comfort and kisses, yet I know she and her family are under siege managing the surreal funeral details and the multitude of others reaching out, plus deliveries of flowers, food and baskets arriving at their houses

I literally feel helpless knowing she is grieving the greatest loss a human being can experience – that of a mom losing a child – any age, no matter. It is not the correct order in life.

What are we supposed to do? How do we handle it when we hear someone died? A card seems so trite, mundane, boring and not nearly enough to offer comfort. Writing a comment on Facebook seems so impersonal and weird, a bit distant, invisible, silent and almost too much like going along with the public. Won't my heartfelt words merely meld in amongst the 905 other comments?

Flowers are passé; there are optional ways these days "to donate in memory of a loved one." Most of the funeral notices say it. (The collection of withered funeral flowers sloppily heaped upon my papa's grave a week after his death was enough to cure me of sending them.)

I have even gifted a boatload of "funeral gifts": cardinal birdhouse, plant, wind chimes, fruit and nut basket, Blessed Mother garden statue, Christmas ornament, and angel figurine. Once I gifted a mother/son-related silver necklace to a family friend who had lost her adult son to cancer.

Yet I think the truest gift we can present to our hurting someone is our *attention* after the entire funeral scene is over. At the moment, they are distracted and busy and managing the myriad of details (there is actually a *lot* to do when someone dies). Later, though - one month ... three months ... six months - your friend will need you. The grief dust has settled somewhat and the person is left alone to deal with their raw emotions and adjust to life without someone they love.

All those people who hurriedly muttered "sorry for your loss" at the funeral home and Mass have moved on, perhaps even forgotten, or pushed the death further back in their minds and hearts. People are busy. They don't want to focus on death, although it's an integral branch of life. They don't want to talk about it all, I think. It is prickly and awkward. That's why people don't take the time to reflect on more original words than "sorry for your loss." (It sounds as common as saying "God bless you" when someone sneezes!)

Yes, *later* is when your friend will need you. We can be present later. We can share much more than "sorry for your loss." We can allow them to talk about their person - that is what they want to do. They don't want people to forget; they wish to keep their person *alive* in discussion, memories, anecdotes, videos and photos.

We cannot erase our friend's pain. We cannot bring back their person. We cannot make it feel better - only time can help that. We cannot make them forget. We cannot reverse the clock nor fix it so their person didn't die.

We can listen, we can hug, we can dry their tears. We can support, we can pray, we can call, email and text. We can visit with them or go out together. We can check in with them often. We can ask how they are adjusting and holding up.

These personal "gifts" I guarantee, will be considerably better than a basket of flowers or those four dull words.