

## My Turn: 'I'm Sorry' Shouldn't Be the Hardest Words

Losing my father was painful enough without having other people try to talk me out of my grief.

By Jess Decourcy Hinds

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May 28, 2007 issue - After a recent death in my family, I received a number of condolence cards that tried to talk me out of my grief. "You should be happy you have your memories," wrote one friend. "You should feel lucky you got to be with your father in the hospital." Lucky? Happy? You've got to be kidding!

Some cards made little mention of my father's death at all. Instead, they focused on the question of how I was going to distract myself from my grief. "Are you applying to grad school?" one person wrote. "How's your teaching going? Are you still renovating your apartment? Are you keeping busy?"

I was 25 when I lost my father last fall. He was only 58, and his death from bone cancer was slow and excruciating. When I cry for my father, I cry for his suffering; I cry because he worked long, grueling hours to save for a retirement he never got to enjoy. I cry because my mother is alone. I cry because I have so much of my life ahead of me, and my father will miss everything. If I marry, if I have children, he won't be there. My grief is profound: I am mourning the past, present and future. I resent the condolence cards that hurry me through my grief, as if it were a dangerous street at night.

Why don't people say "I am sorry for your loss" anymore? Why don't people accept that after a parent's death, there will be years of grief? I am still a responsible citizen and a good teacher, despite my grief. My grief is not a handicap. People seem to worry that if they encourage me to grieve openly, I will fall apart. I won't. On the contrary, if you allow me to be sad, I will be a stronger, more effective person.

On the day of my father's funeral, we were greeted by a grinning deacon who shook our hands and chirped, "Isn't it a beautiful day? I'm so glad you have sun for your memorial!" I wanted to shake this woman. Couldn't she invoke a solemn tone for at least five seconds on the darkest morning of my life?

Our society needs to rethink the way we communicate with mourners—especially since so many people are in mourning these days. Everyone wants mourners to "snap out of it" because observing another's anguish isn't easy to do. Here's my advice: let mourners mourn.

Before I lost my father, I was just as guilty of finding the silver lining of people's grief. If someone told me she lost her mother, I might say something like "She was sick for a very long time. It's good she's not suffering anymore." When a mourner hears nothing but these "silver linings," she begins to wonder why she can't find the good in the situation the way everyone else can. People want her to smile and agree that it's going to be OK, but she can't. Sometimes the death of a loved one becomes easier to accept with time. Sometimes it does not.

Condolences are some of the most difficult words to write or say. So it's natural that we freeze with writer's block when faced with such an immense task. As a college English teacher, I try to help students overcome writer's block by offering them structure. Writers often express themselves most freely when they know the rules of the genre in which they're writing. Here are my basic guidelines for mastering the Art of the Condolence:

1. Always begin directly and simply. "I am so sorry about your mother's death."
2. It's better to ask "How are you?" or "How are you feeling?" instead of telling someone how she should feel.
3. Never say "I can't imagine what you're going through." To me this translates as "This is too hard for me, I don't want to think about it."

4. Never give advice about how someone should get through the loss. Some mourners go to parties; others stay home with the shades drawn. Be open to the mourner's individual needs. Be open to the possibility that these needs will change day by day.

5. If you want to offer something upbeat, share a funny anecdote or memory about the deceased that might bring a smile to the mourner's face.

How do we support people in mourning? We can learn from elephants. Elephants are known to grieve in groups; they loop trunks to support the bereaved. Like elephants, we should remain connected and open to mourners' sorrow longer than a two-hour memorial service. Grieving is private, but it can be public, too. We need to stop being afraid of public mourning. We need to be open to mourners. We need to look each other in the eye, and say "I am so sorry."

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