

HOW TO WRITE A CONDOLENCE LETTER

A funeral director dissects sympathy notes from Emily Dickinson and Ernest Hemingway.

By Mallory Rice



Not long ago, Amy Cunningham, a funeral director for Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery, convened about twenty strangers in a third-floor room at the Sixty-seventh Street library in Manhattan, for a workshop on writing condolence letters. (The event was part of a festival called “Reimagine End of Life.”) “I have a confession to make at the outset,” Cunningham

told the crowd, a group of women of diverse ages and scarf preferences. “Though I have studied condolence letters and thought a lot about this, I struggle to sit down and write a letter myself.” For many of us, she said, the problem is ambition. “I think we want it to be too good and too all-encompassing.” As a result, some people fail to write anything at all. Or they procrastinate. “I even find myself saying, ‘Oh, I don’t have the right stationery at my desk at this moment,’ or ‘Where are my stamps?’ ”

Cunningham, who has soft blond bangs that frame her face, pulled up a PowerPoint presentation and clicked through some tips. “Passed away” is out; “died” is in. Don’t say, “I know how you feel” or “This is God’s plan.” Handwritten letters are always good, but you can also type something and print it on ivory paper. “I’m not opposed to preprinted cards,” Cunningham said.

To illustrate her points, she shared a few condolence letters from famous literary and historical figures. “This is not a good letter, Charlie,” Ernest Hemingway wrote to Charles Scribner, the son of his late publisher. “But I still feel too sad to write a good one.” Cunningham awarded him points for completion. “Aiming for excellence is really only going to hold you up.”

Writing to a friend’s widow, Aldous Huxley veered into esoteric musings: “How are we related to what we were? Who are we now and what were we then? . . . There are no answers, of course.” According to Cunningham, this was not “a home run,” although it might have been endearing to a friend of Huxley’s.

Next came a lesson in tone. Nancy Mitford once ended a letter to her cousin, whose husband had just died, on an oddly chipper note: “It’s nice that Decca is coming over for a long visit. Why don’t you come to Versailles with her—I would put her in a hotel and you could stay with me. Think of it.”

“This is not a success, O.K.?,” Cunningham said.

Also, don’t make it about yourself, as Queen Victoria did in a letter to Mary Todd Lincoln after the death of the President: “No one can better appreciate than I can, who am myself utterly broken-hearted by the loss of my own beloved husband, who was the light of my life, my stay, my all, what your sufferings must be.”

“Maybe if you’re the Queen of England you can break the rules,” Cunningham said, shrugging.

For inspiration, she shared the work of two overachievers. Emily Dickinson sent mourners a sequence of condolence letters, to reach them during different stages of grief, and enclosed flowers from her garden. Marcel Proust, Cunningham said, was often in “such a state of ecstatic relatedness to grief, loss, and remembrance” that he could go on for pages about people he’d never met.

Next, Cunningham produced her secret weapon: a Victorian-inspired condolence “tool kit” that she’d made from an old wooden box, decorated with découpaged butterflies. She opened its lid and pointed out various compartments, for stamps and envelopes. “If you really want to go nuts, there’s sealing wax in here and a little candle to calm yourself.”

It was time for an audience Q. & A. One woman mentioned the cards she’d received from her late mother’s neighbors: “It meant a ton to just be acknowledged.”

The discussion turned to fraught family dynamics. Cunningham talked about her own struggles after the death of her mother, with whom she’d had a complicated relationship. “Yeah, what do you say when it’s kind of ‘Sorry, not sorry?’ ” another woman asked. Cunningham advised restraint.

Finally, Cunningham passed around a wicker basket filled with white sachets, each containing two stamps printed with the word “love” in swirly letters. They were the beginnings of a tool kit. “It’s nice to have everything all set to go and no excuses,” she said. “You know where your condolence gear is, and you’re ready to take action.” ♦

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