

Finding the Right Words: Using Sympathy Poems and Quotations

We live in a visual culture. The transition from exclusively using books and printed materials started at the turn of the 20th century, with the advent of silent films, and today, we're inundated with hundreds of television channels; dozens of film releases each year, and the advent of online video. Perhaps the biggest effect this has had can be seen in our inability to express ourselves with words; many people search, in vain, for the right words to express the strong emotions of love, grief, sympathy, and empathy when needed.

When you're faced with telling someone you care about just how sorry you are for their loss, you may find yourself groping for the perfect phrase. Before we go any further, let me just say this; no matter what you say in a written communication, the old expression "it's the thought that counts" really takes on meaning here. Those who are in the midst of loss will surely appreciate the gesture, no matter how clumsily written. But, with that said, we all hope to appear eloquent and well-spoken; and taking advantage of the plethora of online resources can make all the difference to the task at hand.

Using the Words of Others

Let's face it; grief and loss aren't new to the human condition. Thousands – nay, millions – of people have faced what you're facing at this very moment – and many of them were wordsmiths, philosophers, or poets in their own right. What they said has been handed down through the generations, and are now available to you to help you express your *own* feelings. There's one basic rule, however; you must *always* cite your source. Never steal, never plagiarize; always let the recipient know who originally wrote the poem or quotation you're sharing with them. It's simple courtesy.



Figure 1: Marcel Proust

Quotations Are Often Not Appropriate

Unfortunately, many times quotations related to grief and bereavement are simply not appropriate to someone new to loss. This is because they 'pontificate' on the rewards of grief; and who wants (or even needs) to know that this all-encompassing sorrow is at all beneficial to them? Consider this quotation from the brilliant Marcel Proust: "*Happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind.*"

Honestly, this is one beautiful comment on the power of grief to transform and expand, but it would not be warmly received by someone who has recently lost a person they loved. Nor

would it be kind to send John Adams' sentiment: *"Grief drives men into habits of serious reflection, sharpens the understanding, and softens the heart,"* as true as those words are. And, consider the short comment from his peer, Benjamin Franklin: *"Those things that hurt, instruct."*

Such insights are best left to messages sent later in the grief cycle – once *acceptance* has been realized.



Figure 2: Blaise Pascal

You may choose instead to focus on the transformative nature of grief; after all, the cycle, once endured, forever changes. Blaise Pascal wrote, *"Time heals griefs and quarrels, for we change and are no longer the same persons."*

Or, you could use other writers to comment on the belief that the deceased is still 'with' them:

"He who has gone, so we but cherish his memory, abides with us, more potent, nay, more present than the living man."

~Antoine de Saint-Exupery

So, the upshot of this is, be mindful of the nature of the quotation you've chosen. If it is instructional, it may have to wait for another time. Select those quotations which are uplifting, positive, and empathetic. Here's a lovely sentiment about the power of love and memory, from a headstone in Ireland:

"Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no one can steal."

Can you feel the difference? In this quotation, the reader is reminded that their memories are theirs to keep, and that no one – not even Death itself – can take them away.

Sympathy quotes can take a variety of forms, but the essence is the same: that you understand, and can offer comfort. Consider the wonderful words of Thomas Campbell, who wrote,

"To live in hearts we leave behind, is not to die."

The Power of Prayer

For those people who have a spiritual bend, prayer, the task of calling upon a Higher Power to bring comfort, may be more than suitable. Prayer comes in all forms, and in all faiths; selecting one appropriate to your recipient can be challenging if you're unclear as to their religious

affiliations. But, you really can't go wrong with the opening lines of the following funeral prayer:

*Death is nothing at all.
It does not count.
I have only slipped away into the next room.
Everything remains as it was.
The old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged.
Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.
Call me by the old familiar name.
Speak of me in the easy way which you always used.
Put no sorrow in your tone.
Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together.
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.
Let it be spoken without effort
Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was.
There is unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?
I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the corner.
All is well. Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost.
One brief moment and all will be as it was before.
How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting, when we meet again.*

This wonderful passage is derived from a sermon written by Henry Scott Holland, who delivered it in [St. Paul's Cathedral](#), in London, on 15 May 1910. At that time, the body of [King Edward VII](#) was lying in state at [Westminster Abbey](#). Although not originally stemming from Irish writings, versions of this sermon have been used at many Irish and Catholic funerals over the years. How beautifully the sentiments of “unbroken continuity” after death are expressed! Consider the line:

“Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was.”

So reassuring to someone who's life feels shattered by loss.

If you're seeking prayer as solace, I recommend a visit to [Prayer and Prayers](#). This site has a wonderful selection of prayers for every occasion, including death and funerals.



Figure 2: King Edward VII

The most famous funeral prayer in modern Christendom is the 23rd Psalm:

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.

While this may not be a prayer you wish to quote in a sympathy card, it is quite comforting to listeners at a Christian service. A fine selection of cross-denominational funeral prayers can be found at [Cremation Solutions](#).



There's a fine line between poetry and prayer, especially when the subject is death. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote *Crossing the Bar*, a poem which is often read at funeral and memorial services:

*Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,
But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,*

*When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.*

*Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness or farewell,
When I embark;*

*For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,*

*I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.*

It has the wonderful quality of beseeching and desire; two elements common to prayer throughout the world. Other poetry which brings comfort to readers and listeners exist, from modern poets, as well as those who wrote sympathy poem verses hundreds of years ago.

Poetry: Rhyme and Reason

One of the most well-known modern poems comes from a woman no one knows a great deal about; nor was she a prolific poet. She felt inspired to write the following lines for someone she loved who had suffered the loss of her father:

*Do not stand at my grave and weep;
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.*

*When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there, I did not die.*

Mary Frye, who passed away in 2004, is now the undisputed author of this lovely poem, which takes its name from the first line, [Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep](#).

You can find other sympathy poems worthy of quotation at [PoemSource](#). Most of the poetry here is from Joanna Fuchs, and she authorizes site visitors to use her work in personal, non-commercial use. Her poetic words are powerful, and compelling, and perfect for use in a sympathy card. Consider the following poem:

Reaching Out

My heart is reaching out to you,
For what you're going through;
I'm thinking of you frequently
And praying for you, too.
If there's something I can do,
Anything at all,
Think of me thinking of you,
And don't hesitate to call.
By Joanna Fuchs

More Messages to Write in a Sympathy Card

Knowing exactly what to say in a sympathy message can be hard, and many people worry about using correct sympathy card etiquette. It can quite simply become an impossible task, one which never gets done. "I didn't know what to say," or "I just couldn't" are two common sentiments I hear. But, if you remember that at a time like this, it's good not to be too long winded when thinking of messages to write in a sympathy card, it gets a bit easier.

Here are some examples of messages to write in a sympathy card, or a card accompanying a floral tribute bouquet:

- Our thoughts and prayers are with you during this difficult time.
- Please accept my condolences on the loss of your partner.
- With deepest sympathy for your loss.
- Our thoughts and prayers are with you.
- Please know our loving thoughts embrace you each and every day.
- Thinking of you in these difficult times and sending you love.
- With heartfelt condolences.
- Wishing you comfort at this sorrowful time.
- Sharing in your sorrow, thinking of you and wishing I could be there to hold your hand.
- May the love of those around you, help you through the days ahead.

This one is a simple poem:

Those we love don't go away, they walk beside us every day, unseen, unheard, but always near, still loved, still missed and very dear.

When you add your own words to the message, try not to tell the recipient that things will be alright in time, or that you know how they feel. After all, there's simply no way they can see to that far horizon of "alright," nor can you possibly know how they feel.

If you have time in your life to offer assistance, then do so. It's always welcome, especially when there are children or elderly relatives to care for; grief can be demobilizing in the early days after loss.

In Closing

I encourage you to write a note sharing a *memory* of the deceased. Those gifts of shared memories can help in the healing process; the recipients see the impact their loved one had on the lives of others – it validates their worth.

Everyone wants to recall the special memories of their loved one; when you share some special moments from your relationship with the deceased, it lightens their sorrow. But, if you didn't have a personal relationship with the deceased, don't worry; just know that your note of sympathy will be appreciated.

I've included other valuable online resources for your use during moments such as these. And, I'd like to add a wonderful thought from B.R. Hayden, who penned this most valuable truth:

"Love and death are the two great hinges on which all human sympathies turn."

I honestly believe that it's at times of loss and grief that we are most tightly bound with one another; no matter the culture, no matter the country, class, or social status; death brings us all to the same level. It is truly the "great equalizer."

Resources

Sympathy Quotes

The Quote Garden

<http://www.quote garden.com/sympathy.html>

A website containing quotes for all different kinds of emotions and occasions, including sympathy & grief; be sure to check on related topics: heartache, broken heart, missing you, and adversity.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements.net

<http://www.acknowledgements.net/wordsofsympathy.htm>

This website gives you a wide amount of sympathy quotes and things to use in a sympathy card or a note of condolence.

Condolence Quotes

Condolence Words

<http://condolencewords.com/>

This website starts off with telling how important writing a condolence letter is. And that it must be done well for the sake of the people who are grieving. The site gives you sympathy & condolence quotes, and other kinds of things you should use to comfort a grieving friend.

Memorial Quotes

Memorial Quotes

<http://www.scrapbook.com>

This site has many quotes for Memorials & Death. All the quotes are submitted by a wide variety of people. The site also has poems, newsletters, and other things. The link to their inventory of related quotations is: <http://www.scrapbook.com/quotes/cat/257.html>

Recovering From Grief

Recover From Grief

<http://www.recover-from-grief.com>

This has plenty of memorial quotes to choose from. It also includes information and advice on grieving, and other death related topics. The direct link to their memorial quotations section is: <http://www.recover-from-grief.com/memorial-quotes.html>

Grief Quotes

Think Exist

<http://www.thinkexist.com>

A website database that contains a vast array of quotes on a variety of topics, including grief quotes. The direct link to this subsection is: <http://thinkexist.com/quotations/grief/>. To access the entire site, you'll need to register – a rather frustrating effort. I've registered twice and never received my confirmation emails. However, with access granted for the first five pages of any topic, you've got a wealth of quotations available to you *without* registration.

Inspiration

Inspiration Online

<http://www.inspirationonline.com/grief-quotes.html>

This website specializes in being inspirational, providing site visitors with inspiring poems, articles and quotes, including a section on grief.

Irish Funeral Poems and Prayers

Irish Gifts and Blessings

<http://www.Irish-gifts-blessings.com>

This site is a collection of Irish poems and quotes for a variety of subjects, including death. To access the specific page on funeral prayers, go to: http://www.irish-gifts-blessings.com/irish_funeral_prayer.html

Gallagher

<http://www.gallagher.com>

This website is the personal site of Mark Gallagher, and his tagline is “Making it complicated is easy, making it simple is an art.” It has Irish prayers and poems, including some classic prayers. You can access that page at: <http://www.gallagher.com/prayer.htm>.

Christian Funeral Poems

Hope CRC

<http://www.hopecrc.ca>

This website has a wealth of Christian poems written by many creative, inspiring writers during their own time of loss. See: <http://www.hopecrc.ca/Memorial.htm>.

Funeral Poems

<http://www.funeral-poems.com>

This web site contains Christian funeral verses for people to use for free, categorized as to the relationship of the deceased: mother, father, husband, wife – and they’ve also got a section for pet loss, loss of a baby, and famous funeral poems. To access the Christian funeral verses, visit: <http://www.funerals-poems.com/christian-funeral-verses.html>

Messages to Write in a Sympathy Card

Vicki's Card Making Ideas

<http://www.VickisCardMakingIdeas.com>

This website gives people help and advice on how to write a sympathy card and what people should say in one. It's always good to focus on *your* feelings, and *what the deceased meant to you*. You'll find a wide variety of tips, advice and ideas that you could use in many different kinds of cards, including sympathy notes; to view that section, go to:

<http://www.vickiscardmakingideas.com/messages-to-write-in-a-sympathy-card/>

Examples of Sympathy Notes

<http://www.sadly-missed.com>

This site is designed to host memorial Web sites, for a fee (12 months, for \$9.97), it also has examples of sympathy notes, along with advice on how to write one. Go directly to the related page: http://www.sadly-missed.com/resources/example_sympathy_message.php

Sympathy Card Messages

<http://www.greetingcardmessages.com>

This site has examples of things that would be best said in different types of cards, including sympathy. Access that content quickly at this link:

<http://www.greetingcardmessages.com/cat/sympathy1.htm>

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For more assistance in writing powerful, meaningful sympathy materials, visit www.sympathyflowershop.com, and these related links: [poems](#), [sympathy quotes](#), and [sympathy card messages](#).