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### The Sympathy Cards

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## The Sympathy Cards

By Mike Wischnowski

My Mom passed away in the summer of 2017. In her final years, she had been diagnosed with Lewy body dementia—similar to Alzheimer’s disease in that it involves a disturbance of neural proteins. (Notably, Robin Williams was diagnosed with it before he committed suicide.) In my Mom’s case, she had periods of everyday lucidity that were progressively cursed with memory lapses, isolated wanderings outside of her apartment where she would sometimes lose her bearings, a deterioration of self-care and self-medication (old nurses are the worst), and most cruelly: terrifying hallucinations involving her fear of bugs. As she reached her mid-eighties, other health problems of the heart and lungs conspired. Unsafe alone, she spent the last few years of her life in assisted living.

One late morning that summer, I received a call at the office from my sister that my Mom had been admitted and was in intensive care. Something in Brenda’s voice told me to get in the car and drive the ten hours back to Illinois now. I called my wife and texted my daughters. Even though I was mourning already and trying to keep it together, I didn’t want to leave things undone at the office, so I fussed for a while, not making much progress, until Carol, my Assistant, reminded me of my priorities and gently and firmly, as is her way, helped me out the door. I drove home on automatic pilot, packed a duffel bag and a hanging bag that I decided should include my black suit.

It was a pleasant summer afternoon, a good one for long-distance driving and listening to the introspective music of my youth. My future son-in-law, Danny, and I were to have an appointment that night where I had already figured out that he was going to ask for my youngest daughter’s hand in marriage. (We both knew this was Amy’s decision, but I appreciated the respectful gesture.) I called him from somewhere near Buffalo, explained my Mom’s situation, and we had an awkward, guarded chat—he in a breakroom with co-workers in earshot; me speeding on I-90—that ended with me cutting to the chase with my consent, and offering some pithy but heartfelt advice I don’t remember. I made it to a motel past Cleveland with bloodshot eyes—the past, the present, and the future swirling in my head and heart.

In the morning, I arose at sunrise, ate a quick motel breakfast, and finished the drive to my heartland hometown—a river, a railroad and an interstate (escape routes all) run through it—those “going home” songs sentimentally, unashamedly lodged in my throat.

I met my sister, also a nurse conveniently at this very hospital, in the ICU and we hugged longer than usual. My sister and one of my brothers (I’m one of six siblings and the oldest) still lived in town and had performed dutifully the day-to-day caretaking that assisted living done well still requires.

My Mom was alone and asleep when we entered her room, her worn, beautiful face drawn, a slight snore in her breathing, her tired body connected to the technology standing sentry-like around her. Her eyes opened though and she saw me and made a smile, her eyes blinking through the inner Rolodex momentarily, and then she said like she saw me every day, “Hi, Mike,” pleased with her retrieval, pleased to see me. My heart weighed suddenly more in my chest. My sister said, half-kidding, “You

were always her favorite.” (We are a family of half-kidders.) I bent over the hospital bed and gave my beautiful, exhausted, old Mom a kiss.

In between her naps that day, we had some good, clear-headed chats. Later, Amy would call and announce her engagement to Danny and Mom was lucid and happy on the phone, and in a halting voice wished them well at the end of the call. It would be her last, best afternoon.

Later that night, I camped out on a recliner in her room. In the early morning, she struggled with her breathing, became frightened and combative, pulling out tubes, her young nurse and I trying to calm her down. At one moment, Mom’s eyes locked on mine as I was restraining her, and she said clearly through great fear and confusion, “Mike, help me get out of here.” Holding her gaze, I said, “I will, Mom. I will.”

After that night, her condition worsened and she eventually was moved into a hospice ward. We siblings hovered over the bed in the beginning thinking the end would come immediately, but we soon realized time was unpredictable and we eventually worked in shifts. I remember visits by her doctor, one she used to butt heads with when he was a young know-it-all and she was the veteran head nurse; somehow they forgave each other enough for him, now in late middle age, to be her primary care physician. When he would come to her bedside, he would sometimes whisper, “Oh, Eva...” sadly, as she struggled for breath, as if they were still working things out.

A nurse administrator my Mom mentored came and laughed and cried with us. Our favorite cousins stopped by and got the last intelligible words from her. A music therapist came in with a guitar and she sang our requests that we thought would be Mom’s. We gave each other time alone with her. Throughout, the nurses were expedient and gentle with their palliative care, kind with their realistic, compassionate words and eye contact.

When my Mom quietly passed, her kids were with her.

My siblings and I all left the hospital exhausted and went our separate ways. My wife and daughters had not yet arrived. Stepping out into the hot, humid night, I was restless, spent, but I didn’t know what to do with my grief and was at the mercy of impulses. After driving aimlessly on roads I knew by heart, I ended up at a fast-food restaurant, a local haunt, hoping I would run into an old friend, somebody who knew me, somebody I could lay this all down with. After looking around the empty plastic tables, I ordered a shake, took one sip as I walked out, and then threw the rest in the garbage.

The next morning, I wrote my Mom’s obituary on my work laptop and revised the tribute later with my siblings. We met with the funeral home director, a young, cheerful woman, and then the parish priest, someone with whom my Mom had felt betrayed. I offered to give the eulogy and he acquiesced, admitting he really didn’t know her. He offered and I accepted a tour of my old grade school afterward, and we parted on good terms.

My wife and daughters arrived and I felt relief to have them there. An extended family our size inevitably has some land mines. In the end, I was so proud of everyone. There were no arguments. We were all good to one another in spite of the painful decisions and emotions we shared.

The wake was a cavalcade of memories—old neighbors, high school friends, close and distant relatives, former co-workers—one of the benefits of living long-enough in a small-enough town. It rained hard outside that afternoon. When the wake ended, we waited under the funeral home awning before venturing to our cars. Then the rain stopped and the sun came out, and a brilliant rainbow shined in the sky. I still have a picture of it on my phone.

The next day, at the funeral, I gave the eulogy to a small crowd, emphasizing my Mom's lifetime of caring. I could hear tears being blinked away out in the pews in the hush when I finished. Driving down from Chicago, an old neighbor and friend, a church organist, and a cousin, a music teacher and trumpet player, provided an all-out suitable soundtrack as we processed out of the church. We had a luncheon afterward in a conference room at the Holiday Inn, one last party for my Mom, little kids running around all over the place.

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Back in New York, back at work, I started receiving sympathy cards from mostly New York co-workers, friends, and neighbors. I think sometimes that when we write sympathy cards that we feel we are being perfunctory, just showing due respect, slightly removed from the situation and the deceased, maybe imposing, wondering if it matters. I was surprised at how comforting the cards were. I've always been a little tongue-tied around death, not wanting to make it worse for the bereaved, but I found that even the awkward or perfunctory cards I received provided some solace. I felt less alone, recognition with each card that I was a part of a shared community of grieving, mortal souls. Yes, Hallmark has hijacked yet another deep human, emotional transition, but I have to give them due credit for the assistance to the articulation of care that can sometimes escape many of us at these times. Our better angels can be in those cards.

The sympathy cards for my Mom have been in the bottom drawer of my bedside table all this time, a stack of about 30 cards, some with beautiful art and sentiments on them, others more gaudy or pedestrian, some religious, some with no manufactured words on the inside, but instead the naked thoughts of the person sending it.

I didn't know what to do with them, but I didn't want to throw them away. I stuffed them in the drawer and forgot about them, until the pandemic hit.

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The pandemic lockdown has been a time for, among other things, much needed housekeeping. Barb and I have cleaned windows, floors, countertops, bathrooms, air vents, furniture, cupboards, and the refrigerator like it regularly should be done. The place looks great now, but nobody can come over. We have continued our never-ending quest at downsizing while still ordering too much from Amazon.

One day, I was going through bedroom drawers and there they were—the stack of sympathy cards. I sat on the bed and took the time to read them again, absorbed the senders' best intentions now at a distance, and was touched, less painfully, anew.

I am also on this mindfulness-meditation-minimalist kick. Although I regret too much of my past and worry with an extra layer about the future, mindfulness reminds me in my anxiety that in this very moment, I am alive, I am ok, and I can take a few deep breaths and carry on.

One of the books or podcasts or documentaries or You Tube videos I just can't get enough of suggested that one way to be mindful is to: "Once a day, think of someone close to you—a family member, a friend, or a co-worker-- and give them a genuine compliment." While in semi-quarantine, it is hard to be with people to give them such compliments. Finding the sympathy cards gave me an idea. For about a month during the lockdown, each day, I chose a sympathy card and tried in some way to contact the person who wrote it and just let them know I was thinking about them. The contact was made, depending on the person, by text, phone call, card, e-mail, FaceTime, or Facebook.

People wrote or called back. I connected with college roommates for a virtual Happy Hour (one dude I hadn't seen in 40 years) that put us back into the you-had-to-be-there 70's. I sent a Wonder Woman postcard to my niece who is a nurse and she texted me with lots of emoji, telling me it made her day. I also happened to be on sabbatical, so I checked in with co-workers, past and present, just to see how they were doing. There was some karma in it, too. For example, one of my neighbors saw me walking by her place with my phone and earbuds, and she called me, thanked me for my e-mail, complimented me on my exercise, and I turned off the podcast and we caught each other up on the books we were reading. She made my day.

Some cards were more challenging to respond to than others. They came from folks distant enough that I am not sure a contact from me would be that wise, possibly too awkward, so I substituted at times when those cards came up, still in honor of the person who sent it.

My Mom was a healer and I think she would appreciate this gesture on her behalf, especially during a pandemic. The nurse and the mom in her would be glad to know that I am letting go some, too.

I've gone through all the cards now. They are all recycled, good for the earth, ashes to ashes and all that.

Thank you to anyone reading this who took the time to try, in this small way, to comfort me in my sorrow back then. Using the sympathy cards, I've tried to pay it forward. Let us continue to comfort each other how we can, pandemic or no pandemic, acknowledging the pain, being even in a small way a part of the healing process for others, celebrating each other's contributions and lives. Death remains an awkward topic for me, but I hope I can take my own advice.

When I see the stories in the news of families facing the death of loved ones during the pandemic, it makes me heartsick as I know how vital it was to be with my Mom and family during this time. I hope the pandemic will be over soon and we can restore our most important rituals to their completeness. In

the meantime, our gestures of sympathy are equally important, across great physical and emotional distances, at this time, maybe more than ever.

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Postscript- January, 2021

I wrote a first draft of the above piece in May, 2020, and have revised it a few times since. I was on sabbatical in the Spring semester after almost eight years of being the Dean of St. John Fisher's School of Education. Due to the nether land feeling of the sabbatical—an ambivalence I've been feeling toward whether to continue as a professor or retire—the administrative hangover (my nervous system still on high alert for the everyday decisions and conflicts), and then the forced semi-quarantine of the pandemic, I found myself in this intricate funk, a confusion of feelings unresolved and locked down.

When the call for submissions came for this Covid journal, I tried to think of an unusual action I took because of the pandemic and the unique activity that came to mind was what I had done with the sympathy cards. In writing this piece, I didn't intend to take as much time with the description of Mom's last days and funeral, but that's what came out, and there was some catharsis for me. The retreat feeling of the sabbatical mixed with the mortal gravity of the pandemic had allowed the grief, too, to not be denied.

When I read the piece now, I get an out-of-body-experience feeling. Enough time has passed and enough mental space has been cleared for proper reflection upon my Mom's passing. The daily noise of administration has become a sort of tinnitus that I only hear if I dwell on the memory of it. The menace of and the impatience I feel toward the pandemic is slowly taking its place. I know it's sort of cliché to say it these days, but engaging in acts of self-care as well as service and gratitude toward others, however small, can be a salve to these painful feelings.

I wonder if you ever completely process the grief of a loved one. I was looking inside a cookbook the other day and saw my mom's unmistakable handwriting on a recipe and I was surprised at the piquancy and depth of the pang in my chest when I discovered it.

The pall of the pandemic can't help but remind of us of what we've lost, what we are losing, what we may lose. I so appreciate the idea of the Covid Journal—the opportunity, like a sympathy card offers, for the expression of such complicated feelings in a complex time, and documenting it.