

BRADFORD WRITES
University of Pittsburgh-Bradford
Fall 2021

Do you ever have that moment when you pondered upon words of condolences and wondered if they were said with purpose, or if they were simply an automatic response that were engraved into people? Words began to slowly lose their meaning. The power that they once harnessed evaporated with every repetition of common phrases and soon enough, they were dull to me.

During times of grievances, phrases uttered such as, “I’m so sorry for your loss...If you need someone to talk to, I’ll be here...My condolences...etc.” often made me question if the people who said them were genuine. The commiserating expressions on their faces looked nothing more than a façade to me, an illusion that I could wave away. Perhaps it was because of the repetitive wording, but a belief formulated in my head, which I stood by firmly. That there was no sincerity within those sorts of words. Except for certain phrases such as these, “It’s the way of life...I’m sure that he/she is resting in peace now...” and so on. The source of my personal philosophy.

At a young age with words of comfort like the examples before, my impression of life and people was that if someone chose to do something, there was no reason to stop them. The time I spent lamenting could be used for something better. Human beings come and go in one’s life, and if it was their choice to leave, then why fight to keep them by my side? Throughout my life, I witnessed such actions through my friends and family members and could not properly grasp why. It would be far more beneficial to think of the big picture rather than worrying over something trivial, like someone’s well-being. Time was precious, and it was clear that a person’s life was expendable in the long run, or so I believed anyways.

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know how all these different emotions felt, and my train of thought followed that if I read something I wrote, it would have a larger impact on me. Then, I would be able to understand and feel the same way as those around me. A chance thrown into the wild.

Poetry became an addiction of sorts. Not in the way that people would normally associate with drugs, but I was in a sort of a trance, spiraling deeper into the obsession with each completed poem. Even if I told myself that I needed a break, my fingers twitched as ideas floated inside of my head, prodding for me to pick up a pen or pencil to write *something* down. Stacks upon stacks of paper filled with nothing but my work, I noted a pattern in my writing after some time of scrutiny and feedback.

Dismal.

A consistent tone within my writing as I delved deeper into poetry. It was never intentional, but my poems followed that route like a rowboat drifting along the river. Perhaps it was the fact that sorrow was what I truly wanted to feel. Regardless, new efforts to try out different tones in my writing resulted in my mind drawing a blank, staring mindlessly at the paper or wall until I gave up. Foreign difficult obstacles slammed into me out of nowhere with every attempt, and my only choices were to accept the unsatisfactory result or to veer off-course with my comfort zone being the destination.

“Are you okay? Do you need someone to talk to?” Typical questions that slipped out from between those who read my poems.

“No, now what do you think about the poem?” I responded with mild irritation coating my tone, fingertips tapping against my forearms.

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“Are you sure that you don’t want to talk about it?” They pushed, not yet noticing my annoyance at all the questions.

“Yes! I’m completely sure. Now will you answer *my* question?” I very nearly snapped back, exasperation evident in my eyes. I wanted to know what they thought of the writing, the poem, the emotions, everything else except for how it correlated to *me*. Was it too much to ask for? Right about then, others caught my temper starting to flare and gave their input, explaining how the emotions were portrayed through the words. Whether there were compliments or critiques, I accepted all of them and peeked back to see how far I advanced. Wanting to see the small steps of improvements in myself, I blinked as I saw nothing behind me. It matched the lack of emotions within me. Where was the sensation of feeling to overcome the hollowness inside? I was back onto square one with this festering sense of dread toward the sickening emptiness that refused to give fruition to any emotions I wanted to grow inside. With the poem back in my grasp and no signs of development, I did feel something else next to the desolation while the sound of paper crinkling in between my fingers was off in the distance.

Frustration.



Solivagant.

Perhaps it was my inability to properly express myself that I believed I was alone in my surroundings. My thoughts tended to contradict my family’s and friends’, making it quite difficult to interact with and talk more with them. Even though I had these people by my side, it

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still felt like they were pseudo companions, nothing more than props that would soon have their values expired. I wanted to branch out of the suffocating environment I found myself in.

Just like any other person who wanted to seek something new in his or her life, I ventured out into the application, Discord. Originally, it was to communicate while playing games with my friends, but due to conflicting schedules, the idea fell away. Rather than removing the app, I became nosy with the various functions on Discord and was pleasantly surprised with what it had to offer. Thinking that its only purpose was to be a platform for people who did gaming, the variety captured my attention, such as the different servers and bots people created within the application.

Through my sparse amount of time looking through Discord, the small bud of interest grew rapidly, blooming eagerly as I absorbed the information. A fleeting time later, I joined a variety of servers on a whim and came across my first online friend within a zodiac horoscope one. We conversed often and out of the blue, she asked if I wanted to talk to someone who she thought I would be good friends with. Baffled, my eyes scanned the text repeatedly to confirm that the information was accurate before agreeing as my curiosity was piqued.

I was given vague information about Max, I found about her name later on, and in all honesty, the initial impression was rather lackluster. The surging fountain of excitement that first filled me to the core was gone, dwindling rapidly. Disappointment settled in, resting comfortably on my shoulders as it weighed them down. I was already subconsciously preparing for yet another person who I'd be entertained with until they left my life. But as intervals of time progressed and conversations were more frequent, a bond was formed. I no longer perceived her as a mere acquaintance but as a friend whom I was eager to interact with daily.

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One thing to note about this newfound friendship was that it started off very rocky for me. The first issue was her sensitivity as a human being. With my apathetic nature, the perspective that was displayed to me by her was like a phenomenon. To call it enthralling was a severe overstatement as I was much more terrified by what I was now experiencing, and I disliked it. Heavily. She held my attention with every story she told me about herself, and there was this pressure beginning to develop in my chest. It almost felt like suffocation, catching me completely off-guard. Empathy. A truly orphic sensation that stemmed from an individual on the other side of a device, an individual whom I have never seen nor met before in real life.

Indeed, it was a peculiar experience.



Emotions are a tough crowd to please, huh?

Max was on vacation. At this point, we were much closer than before and regularly talked instead of using text. Of course, since she was on a trip, the chances of that occurring were much less than before, but our interactions were still frequent enough for me to not notice a lack of a presence coming from her. The excitement emitting from her words alone practically bubbled to life when she recounted the events she attended, the food she ate, and more. Compared to my bland activities of me alternating between playing games and studying for my exams, it was a nice change of pace for me. It was her last day before going back home, and a promise was made to watch a movie once she returned.

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Two hours didn't even pass by and the serenity in the atmosphere was demolished within an instant. She sent a sudden message to me when I finally mustered up the willpower to study for an exam I had coming within the next few weeks. Expecting another text depicting something that she enjoyed, her second message stopped time immediately. Attempted reassurance to soothe my pounding heart soon lost its purpose as the conversation continued, dissipating while a sense of dread took its place. Max no longer desired to live.

A foreign sentiment was applying its pressure on my chest, slowly crawling up to my throat while wrapping its hands almost tenderly around my neck to begin the suffocation without a single shred of hesitation. Thoughts scrambled, focus lost, this was the first time I had experienced sheer panic because of what might possibly be the disappearance of someone whom I knew from my life. There was a lapse in judgment as my actions transitioned from processing to clambering for any words, anything at all to extricate her from the train of thoughts plaguing her mind.

The moments when she didn't respond, whether they were minutes or mere seconds, had the invisible hand clench my heart tightly in its grasp as fear and panic were my companions the entire time, stuck to my side like glue. Shaky fingers refused to spell anything right on the first attempt, but frustration had no place in my mind and heart given the current situation at hand. Relief flooded my system at the sight of her typing, the grip loosening up long enough for me to breathe, only to lose that privilege once more by the despondent tone that exuded from the responses. If I sensed that much just through text, how much more powerful would it have been in real life? Through a call where I could hear every emotion in her voice? If there was any at all?

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I didn't allow myself to think that far ahead because even the slimmest assumption of what could happen made my sudden tenuous heart plummet down a foot. Never once before had the thought of someone whom I knew standing by death's door affected me so much. The usual vacancy in my mind was swarmed now with unadulterated panic and terror, immobilized by the silence on the other side of my phone.

Solace.

Apprehension.

Juggling these two as each passing second felt like a century, trepidation coated the roof of my mouth and poisoned my own thoughts. *What should I do? Is there something else that I can say? What more is there for me to say? Was I not saying the right words? Did she already decide and I'm too late? What should I do? What should I say?* *What should I do what should I say what should I do What should I do*- Ah. What was the use? Everything went still. My train of thoughts vanished into thin air as the pounding sound of my heart seemed to stop completely. The whole world around me faded into the background, including the phone that I held onto with a deathly grip. Nothing existed. Except for despair, of course. Despair hovered over me, caressing my heart as it murmured delicately to give up in my ears, the words bouncing around through my mind and vision. I couldn't argue back. In that moment when time seemed to show sympathy to me, I very nearly leaned into the embrace of defeat. My words were simply words. A bittersweet smile curved its way onto my lips. Once again, my philosophy was proven right.

...Right?

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My mind agreed, but my heart didn't as it instantly burst into action once more. The time-lapse ended as the world snapped back into focus, the harsh, thrumming sound of my heartbeat returned against my ears with a vengeance. Almost scolding me for even letting that happen in the first place. Strange, wasn't it? For the past 18 years of my life, the heart was silent and never gave any input in situations. And yet, at this moment, it grappled with me while demanding to do something. *Anything*. The swirling number of emotions that were in my heart engulfed my very existence and for someone who relied on her brain more than her heart, it terrified me. I couldn't handle it any longer. Right as I was about to make a regretful choice, Max responded. My gaze was fixed on the screen, mind scrambling to keep her from the edge again. Without realizing, I sent a response. No, two.

"I'll never leave you."

"I'm scared that you'll leave me."

Me? Scared? Of someone getting out of my life? Even though it was an impulse, I knew deep inside at that moment that I meant every word. Each one was laced with sincerity, and I didn't know what to make of it. Not that every response I ever sent was calculated, but there was never an instance when it came directly from my heart. Where the mind normally took the wheel, my heart hijacked it as pulses of emotions continued to surge through my body, and my poor brain didn't know what to do. As my eyes scanned over the words once more, I felt a clenching sensation in my chest and memorized the feeling down to the smallest detail, not leaving anything behind. I refused to.

When alleviation finally settled in with the situation diffused, I had to choke back a sob of relief as my mind seemed to break down. Wait...a sob? I raised my hand up to my face, the

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shock piling higher than before at how much they were trembling and ever so gently, the padding of my fingertips grazed the edge of my eyes. Vision slightly blurred, there were delicate droplets of water on my digits, slowly seeping into my skin. Tears.

Tears were in my eyes.



Memories. Do you remember?

Not even a week went by since the event, and I was not able to gain proper rest or break to regain my balance as I laid in bed, preparing myself for sleep. A blow from the darkness, a specific flashback hit me like a truck, knocking the air out from my lungs. Without giving me much time to prepare, I was whisked into the past.

It was a sisters' night, and although I do not really remember what it was called, there was this specific scene that stuck onto me. Not because it was impactful, but because it bothered me. The female lead's lover was dying, and she was cradling his head in her arms, weeping with pure despair as tears streamed down her face. Incoherent words were the first to tumble out from her mouth as she was begging him to return, to not die on her, but he succumbed to his wounds and passed away. As I watched this woman continue to cry and scream for any help even as the empty look in his eyes were evident, it didn't take long before I got tired of it, rather irritated that she was still attempting to do something even though it was irreversible. Glancing over to my sisters to gauge their reactions, I saw that they were tearing up. It was strange. There were little to no pangs of sadness ringing around inside of me, and yet here were my two sisters,

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wiping their eyes due to the sadness that exuded from the TV screen. I did not understand their reactions, so I asked them once the movie was over, “Why try so hard to keep someone close when you know that it’s time for them to go?”

My eldest sister responded, “It’s painful when the person whom you love and care for is gone from your life, and you only have remnants to reminisce about in the past.”

...What?

Ah, so that was what she meant.



Just like puzzles, they all clicked together.

During a time of thinking, I greeted contemplation with open arms, ready to display everything out to it as though it was my personal therapist. Of course, this time wasn't like past times as my heart was now participating in the small session, pulsating rapidly with every moment that I recounted the event. While my mind processed through the experience, sifting through the details, my heart didn't know what to do as it acted in a similar manner to an intern that was thrown into the deep end of work without much experience. It was in a frenzy. Perhaps it was the years of being dormant that it was so full of life and energy now. Clenching and twisting around in its freedom, I was helpless to do anything to stop it. Did I even want to do that? No, I wanted to experience every second of it. After a few moments of focusing through deep breaths, my two sides finally were somewhat synchronized enough for me to dissect and clarify the mysterious swarm that stemmed from deep within me.

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With my eyes glued to the fan above me, pieces started falling into place, and I learned something new about life.

Time was precious. Perhaps, but so was a person's life. *A person's life was expendable in the long run.* Only if it is chosen to become that way. Otherwise, their value was far more priceless. Time, as I found out, wasn't a factor in someone's value. What was time? A gift. A gift that I had been taking too lightly without truly understanding the meaning behind it. As of that moment, I still couldn't fully interpret a person's value in my life, but I was learning. While my mind wandered off to other memories, something dormant within me began to bubble awake. Eyes closing while the recollection flashed by gradually at a faster speed, the edges of my lips tugged upwards into a smile that was a mix of serenity and melancholy for those who were once in my life, a slight twinge of stinging pain in my chest. Who knew that emotions were so painful? So vibrant?

And then. And then came the memories of the people who I was blessed enough to interact and see consistently. The affliction from before dissipated slowly, dulling out into the background as something else began to settle in. Happiness. Nostalgia. But most of all, the once absent value began to build themselves back up for each person. Of course, it wasn't an automatic switch to suddenly become emotional and knowing everything, but I was understanding. Baby steps. Gradually with the utmost care, I embraced this new phenomenon, cradled it close to my chest almost gingerly as though afraid that it'll disappear by even the smallest of things.

The act of cherishing others.