

FUNERAL ETIQUETTE

Good morning, Sezzers,

I guess I'm reaching an age where people are starting to lose loved ones and I realize that I'm a little unclear on certain basic etiquette. I want to be there for friends but I don't want to overwhelm them and when we're not really close I don't know how to respond at all.

So, for instance, if a facebook friend loses a parent, do I go to the funeral although I never met the parent and only know the friend via social media?

Do I send flowers?

Do I call, text, or just send a facebook message?

In general (so not just concerning social media friends) when you go to a funeral are you suppose to bring something, like a card? Do you put money in the card or is that tacky?

Do people still bring food to the home? When I lost my dad, one of my friend's brought over this huge container of Haitian patties (a really flaky dough with meat filling) and it was literally all I ate for a week so I thought that was a really nice thing to do.

Ok, I hope these questions aren't too stupid, but I really want to have decent etiquette surrounding death and I'm realizing that currently I

don't.

If it's just a FB acquaintance and you have no mailing address, I think a FB note is probably fine, unless you have a truly meaningful relationship.

I've never heard of anyone bringing money to a funeral. Maybe there's a culture where that's expected. Generally, your presence, kind words and maybe flowers or a donation to a cause which was meaningful to the decedent in memory of the decedent is all that's expected. (Often the funeral home will have an on-line obit where the family will indicate that donations are requested in lieu of flowers.)

Sasha Golden, Massachusetts

Money at funerals has fallen out of favor, but was quite common years ago when there would be a need for support for the family and payment of the funeral expenses. Maybe 50 years ago or longer based on talking with my mother-in-law.

For funerals for family and those we are close to, we give gift cards to places that deliver so that they can get a meal or two delivered. This prevents them having to eat too much of the same thing or things going bad due to an overabundance of generosity.

For Catholics, we typically give a mass card (do a little googling or ask

the funeral home. Once you give one, you will have an infinite supply mailed to you)

When my mother died, we had a lot of people just show up at the wake, unexpectedly, with just a kind word and a little chat. That meant a lot and I think that's all you really have to do.

Bruce Wingate, New York

I think it really depends on the situation. I've also been in this position lately - although mine have been close family members - and I've appreciated seeing people with whom I had lost contact long ago. It isn't the ideal scenario to be reunited, but often times that's what happens and most families are appreciative that distanced family members have come back into the fold.

I've never heard of money being given at a funeral, unless the family has specifically requested it or you know of a monetary fund established on their behalf for funeral expenses. In that case, you would make the donation directly to the Bank/GoFundMe or another account set up for that purpose. I think it would make the family member feel very awkward if given the money directly.

I only send flowers if I knew the person very well and know their family members. Often times, the funeral home is overwhelmed with flower arrangements and most of them get donated elsewhere. If the person designates a charity in the obituary, I much prefer to use the money towards that cause - knowing that it will be helpful in promoting something on behalf of the decedent.

In different religions, I know they gather at someone's home and food is generally acceptable but again, unless you know that person very well or the religious protocol, I tend not to participate in that gesture.

Sending a card is very appropriate at any time - especially to the surviving family members. I usually don't bring those to the funeral home as the family is generally distraught and busy tending to visitors. I have appreciated receiving cards in the mail when I can read them alone without feeling like I had to respond on the spot.

I'm not so hip on blasting this information on social media. I think it is great for some things but not all - unless you truly cannot locate family and the only means of communication is via Facebook or Twitter.

Just my .02. I don't claim to be Miss Manners but, unfortunately, recent events in the last year have taught me quite a bit about funerals.

Valerie M. Nowottnick, paralegal

It is common in Chinese funerals to give "white gold" (white being the color of mourning), to the deceased's family, depending on one's relationship to the family, and the needs of the family. And, yes, flowers and mourning scrolls.

Yee Wah Chin, New York

You know how people say if there is anything I can do let me know? Well we had a friend who when my dad died sent a card that said he will be over in the summer to cut her grass. We had a huge yard that my dad spent a lot of time cutting. My mom appreciated that so very much and I still remember him for that. Sometimes a thought after the crowds are gone may be more useful than food when everyone is in a giving mood.

Joyce Ann Williams

When my father-in-law died, perhaps a dozen years ago, I was amazed at the amount of money that came in with the condolence cards. No it wasn't enough to pay for the funeral, but it totaled more than a few hundred dollars. My mother-in-law (who did not need the money) and the rest of the

family were unsurprised.. this was what you did.

On the other hand, when the neighbors dropped off two large buckets of KFC, my husband and inlaws were all amazed... although THIS was a custom I was used to. However, over the next couple of days, they quickly realized the value of having some easy food -- any food -- handy.

This spring, my dad died. There were a number of people who gave money for trees to be planted in Israel...but there were a few people who wrote checks directly to mom. It did not make her feel awkward at all, it made her feel quite grateful. But there were tons and tons of food brought over. Yes, we reached the point where we would make jokes like "if we get one more fruit basket".. but there were also things like large trays of chicken parm, cheese and veggie trays, etc. As we sorted through the cards so that we could write thank yous, we realized that the fruit baskets were typically from people far away who were ordering something online, or people who were not very close to my parents. My theory was that the idea was - how can you go wrong with a fruit basket. In any event, there was plenty of food without anyone having to think harder than - should I put this in the microwave for 2 minutes or 3. Those inclined to nibble had plenty to nibble, those not inclined to eat could usually be persuaded to have at least a little something.

In both family situations, none of the cards were opened up with the person around... the family waited until private time, and when they felt able to deal with opening condolence cards.

As for social media, if the announcement was made on social media, I think it's ok to use that for a response. If the announcement was not made on social media, don't be the first one to put it there.

just my \$.02

Laurie Axinn Gienapp, Massachusetts

Thank you all so much! I am learning so much from this! I didn't realize

just how many cultural differences there are when it comes to funerals.

I pray no one else loses anyone, but if they do I'm ready!

Fareeda Brewington

If I know the survivor well, or if they're in my locality, I pick among the following: 1) Make them food like a quiche or lasagna that provides many portions but can be frozen if they don't want it now. 2) Send a very nice flower arrangement from a great local organic florist. 3) Send a handwritten card. I've done the latter for several clients over the last year. I agree with the advice that cards are always appropriate. I've sent flowers when close friends have lost their pets too, with a note that he was a very good dog, and we will miss him (or whatever). That can be as sad as losing a family member for some. I've never included money, but that may be a regional or cultural tradition that doesn't include me.

A few months ago I attended at a funeral for a local lawyer who died in a small plane crash (very common in AK). I knew a lot of his friends, and felt like a member of his community. It was officiated by a pastor, but was at a funeral home. The funeral actually made me feel very uncomfortable. Many of the other lawyers gave inappropriate eulogies about how much of a partier and womanizer the deceased was, and told admiring stories of his escapades. His seemingly-religious family from Texas was sitting in the front row, including a grandmother. And his ex-wife and teenage kids. I think next time I'll just go to the wake and tell a family member or two how nice it was to know him, or if he made an impression on me, and not have to sit through the inappropriate friends.

Open casket always kind of weird me out, so remember you don't have to look in it.

For Facebook, if they've announced it on Facebook or I only know the survivor on Facebook, I send a private message expressing sympathy. If I can come up with something nice to say about the deceased,

I'll do that, like "I'm really sorry to hear your grandmother passed away. She sounded like a real special lady." If there are a lot of similar comments on the survivor's public post, posting there is ok too.

I think it all kind of depends on how well you know the survivors and the deceased. In many cultures, the rituals are more about the survivors than the soul of the deceased, so if you didn't know the deceased at all, still consider expressing sympathy to the survivors.

Monica Elkinton, Alaska

I was raised in the South and that, if you knew the person or the family, you bring a food dish of some kind to the family. I recently attended a funeral for the husband of a friend of mine and I was absolutely shocked, extremely shocked that I was the ONLY person who brought food. I mean I was literally shocked almost to the point of being offended for my friend, who prepared a big big spread for people who came to the funeral. This was so so wrong; she should not have had to do that. I felt so strongly about that I really came close to saying something about it but I refrained knowing it would just cause further pain to my friend who was deeply grieving. She saw nothing wrong with preparing food for her friends. But it still really bothers me that none of those people brought anything. When my dad died last year, there was so much food brought, I have never seen so much food in one place! It kept coming and coming! Good home cooked food as well as KFC and barbecue, canned drinks, etc. But we had a large family, many of whom attended and it really helped having that food to feed everybody. Maybe it is cultural or regional - I don't know. And I would say it is local. I mean local people bring food to the home of the family. We did not receive fruit baskets from delivery services although we did receive many flower arrangements and plants.

Sharon Campbell, Texas

Lots of variations on this one. The meals for the family is still fairly prominent, particularly if the family is young or there are lots of relatives in town for the funeral. This spares the spouse and children the trouble of caring for others when they are grieving. There is a great online program called MealTrain that is easy to set up and that allows people to sign up for meals for someone. That's more for the local folks,

though. Flowers, too, are nice, and they can often be used to adorn the gravesite, so many families appreciate them.

Most obits are online these days as part of what funeral homes offer to families -- there is both a virtual guest book where you can leave a note of condolence and often a link to where the family wishes donations to be made.

I will say that I have gone to funerals of people I did not know well (or at all) but whose survivors were people I had known, and the fact that I was there (particularly when they clearly didn't expect me) was huge to them. I think when you are grieving a loss, you can feel very small and swallowed by the grief, and knowing that someone has taken the time to appear and support you, even if all they offer is their presence and a few words of encouragement, can be very comforting.

From my own experience with losing loved ones, it's often the months that follow the funeral that are the most difficult. The public mourning is over and you're just left with life without them, which is a daily adjustment. And there is often social pressure that you should be over it, or that your grieving is taking too long, when the truth is you will grieve how you will grieve for as long as you will grieve and that could be openly and it could be for years. Sometimes, the heartfelt "I'm thinking of you" or "how can I support you" 3 or 6 months later is even more important than your presence at the funeral or sending flowers. Sometimes people need space and permission to grieve however they need to.

That said, I'm old and didn't grown up with social media, so I'm not sure what a social media friendship entails and what is appropriate. I would

encourage you to follow your own heart, though, and not what everyone else is doing. That way you will be true to you and to your friend. And that's what counts most.

Patricia Meringer, Florida

Ditto Sharon Campbell. In central Texas we take food, maybe to the home if prior to the funeral, or for consumption at the reception after the funeral. (Is term 'reception' okay?)

The subject line 'etiquette' caught my eye, so I assume it okay to report as follows.

Had a recent probate case where a sister-in-law of the widow, my client, was ugly to the widow at the funeral.

She did not stop there. She attended the probate hearing and without filing any pleadings tried to get the court to deny the application for probate of the will on the grounds the deceased brother was dopey from cancer meds when he married the widow and later when he prepared his will 'from the Internet.'

Will was admitted and widow appointed.

After the woman's attorney left the courthouse, the woman ambushed us in the hallway and continued her ugly remarks proving that we can be very ugly and never curse.

How is that for funeral and courthouse etiquette?

Rob V. Robertson, Texas

Sharon,

Did the family prepare the spread? When my grandmother died, we had a large lunch in the church basement after the funeral/burial. That's traditional here, and the church volunteers put it together. We paid the church something (I don't know how much or how it was handled), but many of the dishes were homemade, the St. Rose potluck favorites.

Or maybe it's because my family has a reputation for being not-great cooks. ;)

My grandparents lived in a very small town and knew everyone, but we never had people come to the house after either of them died. All the visiting was done at the funeral home or at the luncheon. Only immediate family went back to the house, which seems to be typical here.

Like Fareeda, I never realized how many different traditions there are.

Thanks for the thread.

Lisa Babcock, Michigan

It is expected to give an envelope with money (koden) in it at Japanese funerals and I think it spread from there in Hawaii so generally speaking is it expected to give an envelope with money in it if you go to the funeral or if you are close to the decedent and/or family but cannot make it to the funeral - unless the family requests no monetary gift, which is happening more these days.

Naomi C. Fujimoto, Hawaii

My mother, of blessed memory, worked for years as a regular extra on a few television shows, including Frasier. In one episode, Frasier was to visit the home of a Jewish widow following her husband's funeral. As they were about to shoot the scene, my mother noticed that Frasier was going to visit empty-handed.

My mom approached the AD and advised him that it would be proper, based upon the nature of the relationship, for Frasier to bring food to the home. A tray of food was rounded up -- but my mom advised that the food was inappropriate (could it have been pork chops?) "Appropriate" food was rounded up, and my mother received the one and only "consultant" credit of her career!

I had a number of friends attend my mom's funeral, even though they had never met her. They were there out of respect for my family, and to be of comfort to me. I was appreciative of that support.

Alan Bail, California

That was an awesome story, Alan! I loved that show!

Fareeda Brewington

Since we're never quite sure who keeps kosher, or to what level, instead of food, our tradition is to bring paper/plastic goods - plates, napkins, cups, flatware, etc. Of course, my mom also insists that we bring hard boiled eggs.

Pamela Starr, Paralegal

I've seen that show often, and that particular episode at least a few times.

What a great story!

Jennifer D. Norris, Indiana

Great story!

I don't know if this is traditional at all, but some years ago when my friend's stepson died, a neighbor dropped off a big box of paper goods - toilet paper, tissues, paper towels, maybe paper plates and plastic utensils. The thinking was that they'd have a lot of people at the house and would need this stuff on hand and should not have to make a grocery run to get it. It was very much appreciated.

Heather Balmat, Virginia

I prepared most of the food that was served at the funeral home after my mother's funeral, but I was grateful for the dishes that a few friends

bought. I admit to noticing that not many people brought food, but decided that perhaps it was either a southern or Jewish tradition and that the attendees didn't observe that ritual. We packed up the leftovers and several people came to my home afterwards and finished a lot of the food, but I'd made enough for Paul and I to eat for a few days.

Actually, shopping for and preparing the food helped me feel less "victimized" by the loss of my mother (and my father previously) as it was hard to focus on work. Cooking has always been soothing to my mental health, though not to my physical health probably, LOL. I dunno. I was just grateful for any expressions of sympathy. It is so shocking to the system to lose a parent, no matter one's age or state of health of the decedent. It's now been almost three years since losing my mother and a decade longer since losing my dad, but I tear up daily when thinking of them because I miss them so very, very much. But then, I don't have any siblings and my parents always seemed so much younger and more vibrant than a lot of my friend's parents.

Vicki Levy Eskin, Florida

I get the sense that bringing food to funeral, or post funeral, gathering is a 'southern' thing.

When grandfather died in Florida in 1980, all the neighbors brought food. Â Grandmother was astounded and puzzled; we're Yankees, and it just seemed really, really, strange.

When my uncle-by-marriage died in August this year, my Aunt made a point of saying "no food"; instead she had the thing catered at the funeral home.

OTOH, she had the 'reception' at the funeral home and not the house, so it might have been different if she had had a 'do' at the residence.

Ronald Jones, Florida

A card is always appropriate, but I usually send it as soon as I hear about the death to the person I know best.

I don't bring stuff to the funeral. I either bring food to the home or have something delivered to the home, preferably prior to the funeral. The family is typically busy and a bit overwhelmed at the funeral.

I try to go to the funeral if I can, if I knew the person well or if it is a close relative of a good friend of mine.

My mother passed away recently, and several of my friends came to either the wake or the funeral who knew my mother, but not well. They were primarily there as my friends. We had put in the obituary a request from my mother that memorial donations be sent to a particular scholarship fund that she had supported for many, many years and had served on the board of for 25 years. Many people contributed to that, and though we don't (and shouldn't) know the dollar amount we did get a list of the messages left and from whom. The church provided a nice spread, though we were expecting to arrange catering ourselves. We also received lots of flowers, and lots of food. Our family in town (10-15 people) ate for many days off the food that folks dropped off.

And though I love living in a small town, one of the most difficult aspects of her death was having to run to Publix to pick up a bunch of subs (thankfully ordered online) for my siblings, father, and myself to eat lunch an hour or two after she died, amidst pickup arrangements, calls from

the hospice clergy, etc. I was really the only one willing and able to leave the house, and everyone was hungry. About 5 people I know said "Hi" to me in the store, both friends and clients, and though I'm usually pretty friendly, I could only muster a quick smile and wave back.

Cynthia V. Hall, Florida

Vicki, that is SO you!

Religious tradition is that the mourning family is not supposed to prepare food or do anything to care for itself. In my orthodox brother's community, the other families rally around and prepare a schedule among themselves such that, when we were sitting shiva for each of my parents respectively, before each mealtime, people would come in with large covered trays of LOTS of food that they would put into the oven or on top of the stove and finish warming, and would set out the plates or bowls and utensils and flatware, so that we, the mourners, would only have to serve ourselves. Those of the visitors who had a grain of sense would not visit during mealtimes, so that we could take a break from sitting at the front of the living room to be "comforted" by the endless stream of visitors and could go to the kitchen and dining room to eat in semi-privacy. There were the rest of the visitors, who had not a grain of sense who would continue visiting during mealtimes anyway.....hence only semi-privacy.

The purpose of food at a shiva home is to feed the mourners, not the visitors. Same immediately after the funeral. It's not an entertainment venue.

Miriam N. Jacobson, Pennsylvania
