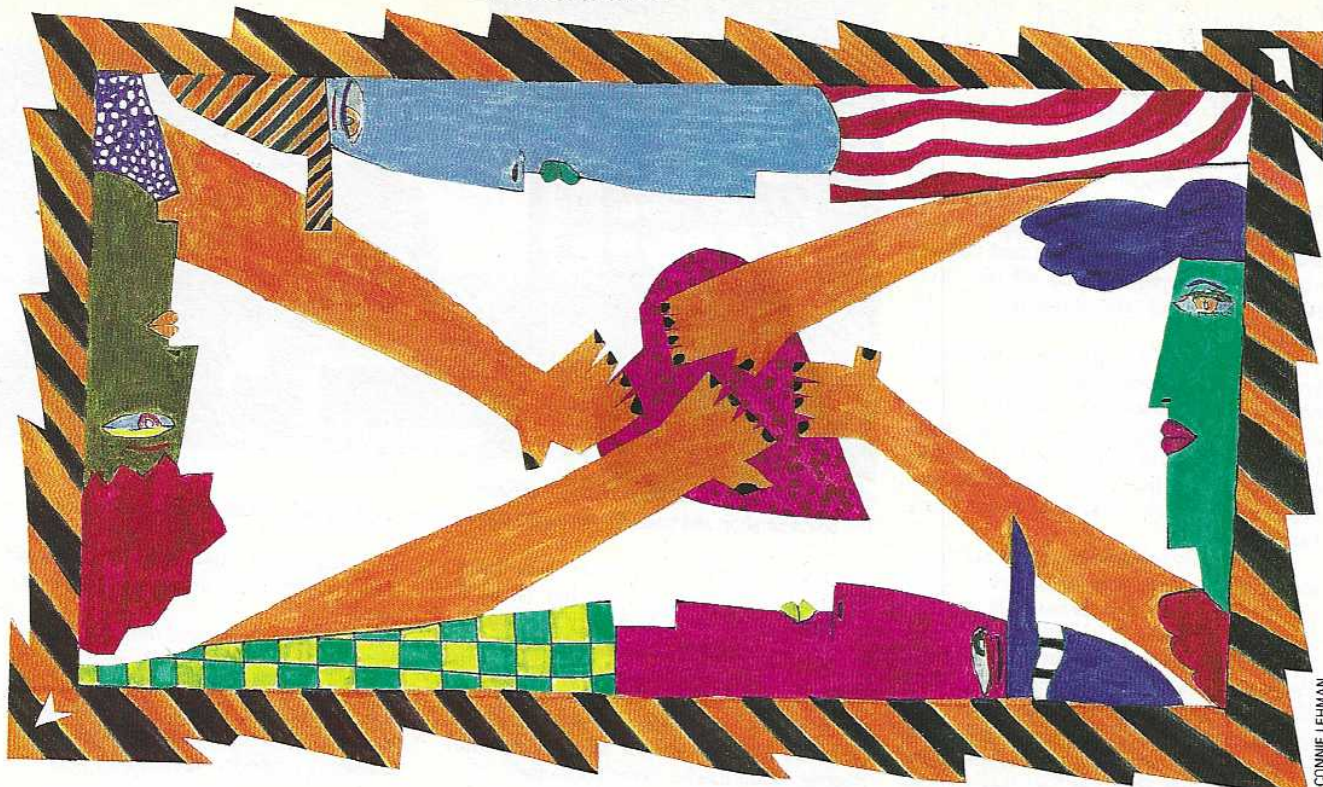


by Hank Nuwer



The Mourning After

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▼
Paying Respects in
Cyberspace

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Stamps' Online
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► **The comfort of familiar strangers is healing to those expressing loss in elegiac 'virtual wakes' online.**

One reward of participating in forums is that members begin to feel part of a community. And, as in communities everywhere, people share the good times as well as the not-so-good times. Many online communities have pulled together during crises, sharing the grief caused by the death of a fellow forum member, a loved one of a member or, occasionally, a celebrity.

People often feel threatened when required to express grief, but may be less intimidated expressing these thoughts online, according to Dr. Dorothy DeMoya, a consultant in the Human Sexuality Information and Advisory Service. "Among patients who've lost loved ones, strangers became family and family became strangers," she says. "To be able to establish online relationships like this is wonderful."

Dr. Sidney Rosen, another consultant to the forum and a New York psychiatrist, finds the online grieving process to be a healthy response to grief and the electronic equivalent of a traditional wake. "The process of allowing those who grieve to talk through their sorrow is similar to the Jewish custom of *Shivah*, in

which the family and friends of the dead are encouraged to express what they feel to one another."

While Tom and Betty Fegely cared at home for her son, Richard Hoats, who was bedridden with AIDS-related complications that destroyed his brain, they turned to their families and to the Outdoors Forum for support. Forum members flooded the couple, who have been members of the forum since its inception in 1985, with concern after learning that Hoats, a Broadway production staffer in such shows as *Miss Saigon* and *Les Miserables*, was deteriorating.

"I felt I wasn't alone from that response," says Betty. "I made no secret that he was dying of AIDS. Nobody turned his back."

When Hoats died the day before Christmas in 1991, the messages of sympathy buoyed the couple's spirits. "As more people shared their support, it encouraged responses from other people," says Tom.

One online message particularly touched Betty. It said: "You look up in the sky and see all the stars, but don't remember each individual one. The one you remember is the falling star." That message was incorporated into the eulogy at Hoats' funeral.

People in the online community understandably are particularly moved when someone who has been a sysop or a forum leader is stricken and dies. This was true of

the unexpected death of Glenn Hart, a member of the Consumer Electronics Forum, sysop of the Fox Software Forum and a contributing writer to *PC Magazine*. He died in January while visiting the MacWorld Expo in San Francisco.

Hart had a gruff online exterior, forever chiding people for sentimentality. But he was an expert on stereo systems and gave of his knowledge freely. "I loved throwing him straight lines," says one member. "They always came back warped." CE Forum Sysop Steve Schecter gathered the messages from both forums and sent them to Hart's widow, Ellen, who is saving them for her young children to read at the appropriate time.

The flood of responses reveals much about the grieving process. When we "get over" a death alone, we often are merely repressing feelings about the loss. In contrast, following the death of Hart, forum members fired off message after message, helping one another overcome feelings of shock, disbelief and sadness.

Many forums have suffered difficult losses. The CB Forum, for example, lost John Mayer, a caring grandfather, better known to his online friends as "Banner." Forum members sent flowers to his wife. When Howard Benner, author of TAPCIS, an automated program to access CompuServe forums, died of cancer, CompuServe members contributed to the Howard Benner Fund to help fight malignant melanoma.

In late June, members of the U.K. Computing and Aviation Forums mourned the loss of David Moore, a pilot whose British Spitfire crashed during an air show in Manchester, England. Members of both forums contributed condolences, cards and letters. One Aviation Forum member even wrote a poem in Moore's memory.

On occasion, people come together online to grieve following tragedies that occur to public figures. For instance, the Living with Aids section of the Human Sexuality Forum grieved along with Arthur Ashe and Magic Johnson in the days following the announcements that the athletes were HIV-positive. So, too, did the RockNet Forum deal with the deaths of rock promoter Bill Graham (in a plane crash) and singer Freddie Mercury (from AIDS-related complications). Many interested in space travel participated in a full-day conference in the Space/Astronomy Forum following the destruction of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986, which resulted in the deaths of six U.S. astronauts and New Hampshire teacher Christa McAuliffe.

Hundreds of messages were generated in the Literary Forum following the illness and death of nationally known poet Judson Jerome, a member of the forum and author of

several books, including *The Youthful Look, a Memoir, 1947-1952* and *Jonah and Job*.

While Jerome touched people with his poetry, his greatest talent may have been his teaching. His students at Antioch College included the eminent poet Mark Strand, but there also were many writers online who considered him a mentor. During his illness, many of them sent him messages of comfort. When he was unable to come online, forum member Diane Engle of Pacific Grove, Calif., printed and mailed the messages to him. She also went to meet him two weeks before he died on Aug. 5, 1991.

Gloria G. Brame of Atlanta was captivated by Jerome's articulate, energetic messages. She was one of many writers and would-be writers embraced online by Jerome. "He inspired people, helped them write better poetry. He gave them advice and comfort, kept them laughing and thinking," says Brame.

The literary community came together following his death the way communities always have when a cherished elder dies,

says Brame. Some planted trees; others wrote poems to remember him. "We mourned him publicly, not with platitudes but with deeply felt emotion and sorrow," she notes. One member collected the messages into a library file, and they were shared with Jerome's widow, Marty. Some 25 members traveled to Ohio in July to attend a memorial service, called affectionately a "Judfest," held in conjunction with the Antioch Writers' Conference. Brame delivered the eulogy.

While Jerome was a longtime forum member, occasionally individuals come into a forum for a relatively short period, but win over the membership quickly by the sheer force of their online persona. One such person was a youngster named Jimmy Loper.

Although for much of his life he was confined to a hospital bed with an inoperable spinal tumor, he managed to open his world by hooking his Macintosh to CompuServe. "Jimmy had many friends online," says Gerry Phibbs, a Macintosh forums staffer. "When he died, it affected those of us who knew him and had spent hours online with

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him in the conference mode."

Some forums are there for people to turn to when help is needed. Two such places are the Cancer and the Human Sexuality Open Forums. "People with AIDS and HIV can get over much of that 'pariah' feeling that comes with the disease," says Roy Richardson, leader of the Living With Aids section in the Human Sexuality Forum, and himself a person with AIDS.

All members often send pain-filled messages. "Bob D., who died in January, talked with us about the fear and anger he experienced when he was found to have brain lymphomas," says Richardson. He talked of the dictionary of music he would never complete and of how he couldn't be the husband his wife wanted. "We'd tell Bob that we cared," Richardson says, "that while we had only an inkling of how much it hurt, how frightening it was, we were with him in any way we could be."

During the last days of 7-year-old Sean Starbuck, his parents, Chris and Karen Starbuck, kept their friends in the Cancer Forum informed of his condition. Everyone in the forum knew about Sean—how he walked

through hotel flower beds and would climb anything that didn't try to climb up him first. And when the plucky Sean finally lost his fight for survival, the outpouring of support for his parents was as moving as it was healing. Several members of the forum attended the funeral in St. Louis, reporting details to bereaved members of the forum.

People find solace in all forums, it seems. When a close friend of Tina Norton's committed suicide, she poured out her thoughts in the Crafts Forum's Unravelling Threads section. "I received a lot of comforting thoughts and good advice on how to cope," she says. Following the death of her husband, Crafts and CB Forum member Kathy Morgret received comfort from her online friends. "The online community is particularly well-suited for support in hard times," she says. "There's so much good will here all of the time that it's kind of a special world we inhabit. Folks often express themselves in ways that they can't or won't in 'real' life."

Pet owners, too, need emotional support when a pet is ill or dying. The Pet Forum has a special support section for this purpose. Nancy Blum sought solace there when her

11-year-old cat, Rashi, died suddenly. Family members couldn't understand her sorrow, telling her the cat could be replaced. "In contrast, I found the support staff of the Pets Forum to be a wonderful resource," she says. "They were extremely understanding and encouraging, and gave me the opportunity to pour out my grief about Rashi."

Those who receive comfort online are often the first to give it. Because of the experience with their son, the Fegelys both say they are likely to respond when other forum members face similar hard times. They call the Outdoors Forum "a family."

Betty says that, in time of grief, all words are comforting, not just the poetic messages. Any little bit of humor is especially appreciated. "It doesn't matter what you say, it's the fact that you somehow reached out," she says.

In particular, the Fegelys believe that online friends can help those with life-threatening illnesses living far from immediate family. "Nobody should have to die alone," says Betty.

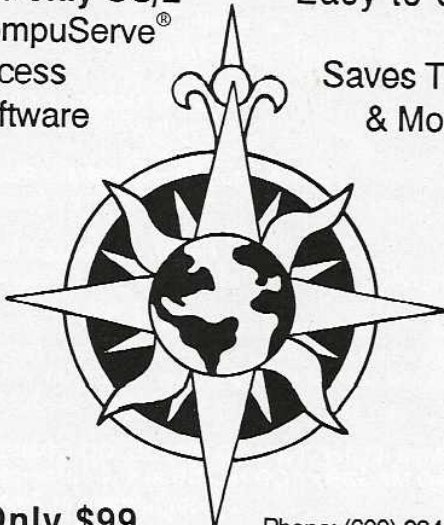
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Read More About It

In addition to expressing your feelings of grief online, you can get help in understanding and dealing with sorrow through many articles available online. Here are some selections:

From Magazine Database Plus (GO MAGDB):

"When There's a Death in the Family," *Woman's Day*, Nov. 5, 1991. Reference #A11384096.

"So Much for the Merry Widow," *Cosmopolitan*, March 1991. Reference #A10398083.

"We Have a Problem," *Parents' Magazine*, January 1991. Reference #A8995518.

"How to Help Your Friends When They Really Need You," *Woman's Day*, Oct. 2, 1990. Reference #A9353687.

"Staring Death in the Face," *Woman's Day*, May 1, 1990. Reference #A8935423.

"When a Parent Dies," *Parents' Magazine*, June 1989. Reference #A7603509.

From Health Database Plus (GO HLTDB):

"Depression Through the First Year After the Death of a Spouse," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, October 1991. Reference #A11389711.

"Help in Expressing Grief," *Medical World News*, October 1991. Reference #A11464979.

"Grief Is a Living Process," *Mothering*, Summer 1990. Reference #A9156237.

"When You Don't Know What to Say," *The University of California, Berkeley Wellness Letter*, May 1990. Reference #A8939321.

"Grief and Bereavement in AIDS and Aging," *Generations*, Fall 1989. Reference #A8173943.

"Recognizing Grief: Half of the Struggle to Recovery," *Ostomy Quarterly*, Fall 1989. Reference #A8062507.

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Blue Believers
Join Hands-p. 18

Strange-But-True
California-p. 28

Lamenting Loss
Online-p. 32

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