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## When Words Matter Most: Positive Psychology Perspectives on Condolence Letters

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# When Words Matter Most: Positive Psychology Perspectives on Condolence Letters

## Abstract

While the focus of positive psychology is uncontestedly on the positive, there is an emerging direction in the field indicating that the coexistence of both negative and positive emotions is critical to well-being. The act of writing a condolence letter is a good example of precisely this coexistence: loss and sorrow giving rise to the act of expressive writing to convey positive emotions of sympathy, solace, and more. Viewed through the lens of positive psychology, writing a condolence letter has the potential to activate a unique alchemy of elements that the science of positive psychology has identified with well-being, from calling to action over inaction, meaning over despair, and resilience over hopelessness; to identifying character strengths and virtues and enhancing social bonds and generativity; to practicing the master virtue of practical wisdom in modulating the letter's message to the context; and more. A review of condolence letters written over modern history illustrates how these elements have been used over the past two millennia. As there is little relevant empirical research on the impact of engaging in the practice of writing condolence letters on well-being, further study is in order, particularly given the challenges of Covid-19. For now, the practice of writing condolence letters would appear to offer numerous and unexpected opportunities to give rise to positive outcomes associated with increased well-being. This, in turn, enriches the support for the coexistence of the negative and the positive in a life well-lived in the science of positive psychology.

## Keywords

positive psychology, condolence letters, dialectics, coexistence of negative and positive emotions, grief, context, action, meaning, relationships, social bonds, resilience, generativity, practical wisdom

## Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

When Words Matter Most: Positive Psychology Perspectives on Condolence Letters

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A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Jan B. Stanley

October 2020

When Words Matter Most: Positive Psychology Perspectives on Condolence Letters  
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*A condolence letter is a strange hybrid of forms. It is for the mourner, but about the deceased. It is formal, but emotional. It gestures simultaneously at the past, the present and the future. It seeks to provide solace while acknowledging that there is no genuine solace to be provided. It follows a rigorous order while retaining an open-ended flexibility. A condolence letter can be a sort of kindly rote gesture, striking all the familiar ritual notes, or it can be . . . an attempt at summation, or a farewell. We write condolence letters as a gesture of consideration, but also to figure out just what it is we have lost. (Austerlitz, 2014)*

### **Introduction and Scope**

The purpose of this capstone is to analyze the act of writing a condolence letter from the perspective of positive psychology, and in particular how engaging in this unique act has the potential to give rise to many positive outcomes. It also serves as the ultimate example of the coexistence of negative and positive that is, I submit, inexorably part of well-being.

I grew up in a family that took great stock in letter writing. As a child, there was no choice but to complete Christmas thank-you notes by January 1. In my young adulthood living in France, letter-writing was an – no, *the* essential – means of communication with my family and friends who were for the most part on another continent. As I grew older, and started having some experience of death, mostly of parents of friends, I put my letter-writing habits to the task by writing relatively standard condolence letters.

It was only the death of my father, five years ago, that made me understand how much those letters mattered (my siblings and I were quick to measure the difference in impact between a short email and a thoughtful letter). Thus started my own engagement with writing condolence letters that I hoped would matter, and my understanding that this particular act of writing was anything but standard. No matter what my relationship may have been to the deceased (often I would not even have met them), crafting a condolence letter in which I evoked details about the person, tried to capture their essential character traits, touched upon the positive impact of the

deceased on the person to whom I was writing (and/or their impact on the deceased), and ended on a note of meaning and/or hope, became important to me. I discovered that the very specific act of writing in circumstances otherwise associated with sorrow and loss made me feel that I had made a difference, and made me feel good. The appreciative responses I got, and the deepening of my relationship with the recipient that often ensued, made me feel even better.

Why would the act of writing a condolence letter, arising in a time of negative emotions, give rise to these and perhaps other positive emotions, and what conclusions can be drawn from this? This capstone seeks to answer these questions.

For me, writing condolence letters generated some positive emotions, made me focus on meaning and strengths of character worth noting, and enhanced my relationships. I looked beyond my own experience to condolence letters throughout modern history, and found that there are more positive outcomes possible in these circumstances, like legacy, growth, spirituality and ways of reconfiguring loss. Positive psychology offers many perspectives on why this is so, from the factors that emerge from the origins of the science of positive psychology, to the coexistence of the negative and the positive highlighted by some scholars in the field (what others have called, and I will refer to herein as, the “bittersweet”), to the positive impact of expressive writing, including positive interventions like the gratitude letter.

In **Section I** of this paper, I analyze these various positive psychology perspectives. In **Section II**, I review examples of condolence letters throughout more than two millennia of mostly Western modern history to identify the approaches taken by the writers over the years. In **Section III**, I examine the scant empirical research that has been conducted related to the subject of condolence letters, mainly from a medical perspective, but also as regards sympathy cards. In **Section IV**, I consider the connections between positive psychology and the act of writing



condolence letters, first from the perspective of the elements of a positive potential psychology intervention, and second as the ultimate example of the importance of the bittersweet in positive psychology, which, together, pressingly call for further research. I am also setting forth in an **Appendix** my recommendations for writing a condolence letter, based on the research conducted for this capstone.

Prior to turning to these subjects, the scope of my analysis of condolence letters requires delineation.

*First*, a definition is in order. The origins of the word condolence come from the Latin “condolere”, which means “to suffer together,” formed from the root of “com” (“with, together” and “dolor” (“hurt, suffer, pain”) or “dolere” (“to grieve”) (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.). Offering condolences to someone who has suffered a loss can also include consolation, coming from the Latin word “consolationem”, a “consoling comfort”, formed from the same root of “com” with “solari” (“solace”) (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.). Some authors see consolation as a subsection of condolences, in that the latter expresses sorrow at loss generally, and the former includes a further element of an implicit offer of support and help (Carr, 1996). I believe that condolence letters can contain expressions of both sorrow and solace, and more.

*Second*, I am limiting the scope of this capstone to a writing that is in the form of a personalized missive, whatever the method of transmission: a handwritten or typed letter sent by mail or email or other form of digital communication (as will be seen below, many of the condolences sent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were transmitted by an earlier form of digital communication, the telegram). For the most part, I do not include store-bought sympathy cards in condolence letters (and generally recommend against them, as can be seen in the **Appendix**),

although I do address the history and role of sympathy cards in today's bereavement culture and some research undertaken in this regard in **Section III**.

*Third*, my focus is primarily on the impact on the writer of the condolence letter, not on the person to whom the letter is addressed, or the deceased (referred to respectively herein as the "writer," the "recipient," and the "deceased"). However, the recipient and the deceased are obviously important actors in the condolence letter, as the impact of the letter on the recipient and the memory of the deceased are key factors that come into play in its writing. For the most part, I do not use the term "the bereaved," as there may be bereavement in all of the actors previously referred to in these situations.

*Fourth and finally*, writing about death, loss and sorrow is hard, and humbling. The subject concerns situations and raises emotions that are deep and painful, and opens pathways to many other important constructs that are beyond the scope of this paper, from compassion and empathy, to trauma and grief, faith and hope, altruism and various relationship theories, to name but a few. By not delving into these areas I do not disregard or belittle their importance; I am only seeking to focus on one particular facet of these circumstances that demonstrates how the interaction of the negative and the positive can create positive outcomes that has not received the scholarly attention it deserves.

## **(I) Positive Psychology Perspectives Relevant to Condolence Letters**

### **The Field of Positive Psychology**

**Definition.** The field of positive psychology is the scientific study of well-being. Parsing out this definition, positive psychology is first and foremost an empirical science, based

on data obtained through research, ideally conducted through the gold standard of randomly assigned placebo-controlled studies subject to peer review (Seligman, 2011). Second, the study is focused on well-being, often also referred to as ‘the good life’, or ‘what makes life most worth living’ (Peterson, 2006), or captured in verbs like “flourishing” (Seligman, 2011), or “thriving”. As its nomenclature suggests, positive psychology’s focus is on the positive: strengths, as opposed to weaknesses, enhancing mental health as opposed to attending to mental illness, and encouraging heroes, not healing victims (Peterson, 2006).

**Historical origins.** Many positive psychology scholars credit the ancient Greek philosophers with articulating some of the foundational concepts of the field, and in particular, Socrates (469-399 BC), Plato (428-347 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). Socrates was convinced that happiness could be attained through effort and the deliberate focus of *attention* to the soul and virtues (Cooper, 1998, 2004). Plato introduced the notion of *context*, how what is good will depend on the circumstances (Plato & Burnet, 1977). This notion was subsequently developed by Aristotle into the notion of *phronesis*, or “practical wisdom”, a superior virtue that called for context to motivate the degree and manner in which the various virtues are exercised (Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics*). Aristotle also advocated a life of *action* to achieve the good life, with optimal functioning through positive goals and values, developed through habit. He coined the term “eudaimonia” to reflect the flourishing aspect of well-being, making a key distinction with the more “hedonic,” or feel-good, pleasures otherwise associated with well-being (Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics*).

In this manner, three key concepts emerged from these Greek philosophers as necessary to the good life: attention, context and action. Each of these concepts has contributed to – and continues to find its echo today in – the science and application of positive psychology.

The more recent precursor of positive psychology is philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910), who made the case for focusing the mind on joy and meaning, not evil, to achieve healthy-mindedness, which, in James' words, is "the tendency which looks on all things and sees that they are good" (Pawelski, 2003, p. 54, citing to James, 1902/1982, p. 87). James also built on the Greek philosophers' emphasis on the importance of the practice of deliberate attention, such that it develops into habit. Three often-cited quotes from James illustrate this orientation: "My experience is what I agree to attend to" (James 1890/2007, p. 380); "The effort of attention is the essential phenomenon of will" (James, 1890/2007, p. 380); and "[t]he faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgement, character and will" (James, 1892/2001, p. 95).

The search for the key to the good life shifted even more to a focus on the *positive* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, initially developed by popular figures like Dale Carnegie (1888-1955), who promised success through self-confidence (Carnegie, 1932), and Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993), who advocated the power of positive thinking (Peale, 1952). Although lacking the empirical support that qualifies positive psychology today, the focus by humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) on self-actualization and a hierarchy of needs for psychological health, anticipated the shift of psychology's focus from healing mental illness to addressing humans' desire to achieve their highest potential (Maslow, 1943).

But what established positive psychology as the separate field of scientific study we know today and gave it its name – and its force – was the address to the American Psychological Association by its newly-elected President, Martin Seligman, in 1998 (Seligman, 1998). At that meeting and as further developed in his seminal article written in collaboration with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000) introducing various articles on this new science, Seligman advocated a

new focus on the positive, instead of psychology's traditional focus on the negative. For these authors, psychology is not only the study of "pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue." Similarly, treatment "is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). This constituted a call to action for psychologists to work with individuals and institutions to foster human strengths, virtues and resilience, and in so doing, promote flourishing and improved mental and physical health, as was subsequently developed in Seligman's books, *Authentic Happiness* (2002), *Flourish* (2011) and *The Hope Circuit* (2018),<sup>1</sup> in addition to his authorship of and collaboration in countless scientific studies, articles, addresses and teachings in a variety of fields.

Over the following two decades, positive psychology grew into a recognized field, inspired innumerable articles and books (some scientific, others less so), and became the subject of academic and popular offerings, from the University of Pennsylvania's Masters in Applied Positive Psychology established in 2005 by Seligman (2011), to, today, hundreds of courses and seminars offered on and off line in this and related fields. Daniel Horowitz (2018) summarizes this phenomenon in his work on the history of positive psychology, *Happier?: The History of a Cultural Movement That Aspired to Transform America*, noting that this combination of historical forces mixed with increasingly complex and difficult times has firmly established positive psychology as an important vector in humans' search for meaning and well-being.

The factors identified with the elements necessary for well-being have evolved in positive psychology over the past two decades. Positive psychology's initial focus on happiness and

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<sup>1</sup> Although written well before his 1998 address, Seligman's book *Learned Optimism* (1991) also refers to many of the concepts and research relevant to the field of positive psychology, in particular as regards explanatory style, the manner in which people explain and deal with adverse events.

positive emotions was from the perspective of subjective well-being, namely people's own appraisals of their lives. Subjective well-being consists of three elements: (1) more positive affect (affect meaning moods and emotions), (2) less negative affect, and (3) a general sense of satisfaction with life (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999). Subjective well-being is often also referred to as the hedonic approach to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

However, over the ensuing years, many scholars felt that considering just the hedonic elements of well-being missed out on important factors like engagement, mastery and accomplishment, and advocated a more Aristotelian eudaimonic approach which would include elements like meaning, purpose, agency, autonomy, efficacy, and social connections (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Seligman (2001) brought many of these elements together under the acronym PERMA, adding to the hedonic element of *Positive emotions*, those of *Engagement*, *Relationships*, *Meaning* and *Accomplishment* (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Finally, another key area of focus of both the scholarship and practice of positive psychology is resilience, the processes that encourage positive outcomes notwithstanding serious adversity (Masten, 2001), a factor also recognized by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) in their initial article describing the field. Bolstering resilience through changes in mindset or action has emerged as an essential tool for flourishing in a variety of environments, from the classroom to all nature of organizations, whether corporate, non-profit, or institutions like the military (Reivich & Shatté, 2002; Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011). Resilience is a key construct I will return to in this capstone, both as an example of the positive outcomes that can

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<sup>2</sup> A sixth element in the area of positive health has emerged in the past decade, both from the perspective of physical health's impact on flourishing (Diener & Chan, 2011), and physical activity's impact on positive affect (Van Cappellen, Rice, Catalino, & Fredrickson, 2017).

arise from the coexistence of the negative and the positive, and as a framework to consider the consolations contained in many condolence letters.

### **Where Negative Emotions Fit in Positive Psychology**

Notwithstanding positive psychology's emphasis on the positive to achieve a life worth living, positive psychology does not deny the existence of the negative. Indeed, many scholars of positive psychology consider that negative emotions not only form part of a life well-lived, but are essential to the appreciation of positive emotions and the wholeness of life. This sets the stage for understanding the coexistence of negative and positive, which some scholars refer to with the more scholarly term "dialectics", namely the tension of opposition between two interacting forces, here, the positive and the negative. Other scholars refer to this coexistence more evocatively as the bittersweet, a term I borrow in this paper. No matter how this coexistence is defined, I believe that this singular mix supports my thesis that that acting on the sorrow of loss by writing a condolence letter can actually give rise to positive emotions and other elements that contribute to well-being.

**A necessary coexistence of positive and negative emotions.** One early example of an appreciation for this complexity comes from James (1900/1968) in his essay entitled "What Makes a Life Significant." In recounting a happy week in Chautauqua, New York,<sup>3</sup> James describes it as a beautiful, charming resort town devoted to learning, where he was "held spell-bound by the charm and ease of everything, by the middle-class paradise, without a sin, without a victim, without a blot, without a tear" (p. 647). But he found it utterly bland: "in this

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<sup>3</sup> Chautauqua was the original location of an educational program for healthy living established in 1878, which subsequently grew into a national movement.

unspeakable Chautauqua there was no potentiality of death in sight anywhere, and no point of the compass visible from which danger might possibly appear” (p. 648). What James was missing was the intensity of “the higher heroisms and the old rare flavors . . . passing out of life” (p. 648). In short, for James, there could be no significant life without some presence of danger and loss.

While Seligman (1990) had warned against dangers of being “slaves to the tyrannies of optimism” (p. 292), most of his work post-1998 has been focused on the positive. However, many of this century’s scholars of positive psychology have elaborated on James’ view and argue for a larger role of the negative in the good life.

Thus, Sonia Lyubomirsky’s (2008) research demonstrating that a focus on the bittersweet can actually lead to more happiness led her to include seeking the bittersweet in the happiness activities she recommends for treasuring life’s joys. For her, these experiences serve as reminders of the transience of life and encourage appreciation of the positive aspects of what has passed and the time we have left (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Lyubomirsky returned to this theme in her work on positive interventions a few years later, noting both the danger of too much happiness and the need for some transitory negative emotions in certain contexts (Lyubomirsky & Lyubomirsky, 2012).

Another leading scholar of positive psychology, Barbara Fredrickson (2009), expanded on this view, not only warning against too much positivity, but pointing to negative emotions as an indispensable element of flourishing, in that they foster authenticity, vitality and unity/universality. For her, the negative has a key role in well-being. First, without negativity, happiness becomes forced, and people are not genuine. Second, the combination of the opposing forces of positive and negative gives rise to buoyancy and dynamism. Third, appropriate



negativity brings gravity and reality, together “consilience, or unity of knowledge” (Fredrickson, 2009, p. 137).

Other scholars have acknowledged the need for balance between the positive and the negative (Pawelski, 2016), highlighting the interdeterminacy of the positive and the negative and warning against too much of either (Gruber & Moskowitz, 2014).

The bittersweet is also supported in the study of “generativity,” which is the concern for and active involvement with improving the well-being of future generations, generally expressed through parenting, educating, mentoring, civic engagement or the like (Erikson, 1963). The research on generativity supports the existence of a positive correlation between generative adults and improved mental health and other positive outcomes (McAdams, 2013). Of particular relevance to the bittersweet, highly-generative adults are more likely to construe their lives as a variation of a redemptive narrative, involving transforming negative events into positive outcomes (McAdams & Guo, 2015).

Viewed from a more clinical perspective, Schneider (2001) notes that denying negative emotions can increase physiological reactions to stress; Vella-Brodrick (2014) suggests that an exclusive focus on either the positive or the negative may not be useful, helpful or ethically acceptable; and Diener, Heintzelman, Kushlev, Tay, Wirtz, Lutes, & Oishi, S. (2017) opine that some momentary negative emotions are helpful for well-being.

Some scholars take the slightly different position that negative emotions are in fact indispensable to an appreciation of the wholeness of life. Thus, Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014) make the case for the existence – and essential nature – of negative emotions in the positive. For these authors, the whole self is made up of both the more positive and the more negative; it is showing up with the whole self that is important to thriving, beyond happiness.

For example, they cite to the importance of anger as being indispensable to defending oneself and others, of embarrassment as a sign for correction or other adjustment, of effort as essential to achievement, and, of most relevance to this capstone, of sadness as a means of indicating a problem to others or serving as a call for help in avoiding further hardship (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014).

This recognition of the essential role of the negative in a life well-lived was not enough for some scholars, who argued that the science of positive psychology is in fact overly-focused on positive emotions, summed up by the phrase “tyranny of the positive” (Held, 2002) or “naïve, crass happiology” (Horowitz, 2018, citing to Kristjánsson, 3). This line of argument has resulted in a call for a less categorical approach to positive psychology that expressly takes negative emotions into account.

Thus, Ryff & Singer (2003) encouraged the study of dialectics, inviting a deeper investigation into the paradoxes of the opposition of the negative and the positive. Lomas (2016) expands on this dialectics perspective by pointing to the “complex balance, a subtle, dialectical interplay between ostensibly positive and negative phenomena” (p. 3). For this scholar, four principles complexify this balance: (i) appraisal (how to identify the positive and negative), (ii) co-valence (the mix of positive and negative in constructs like love), (iii) the complementarity of opposite emotions, and (iv) the evolutionary nature of this bittersweet phenomenon, itself a dialectic of opposing forces between the positive and the negative (Lomas, 2016).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lomas has also studied the bittersweet language used throughout cultures which, he argues, can encourage well-being by calling attention to and shaping complex emotional constructs, and has compiled a list of some 1200 words that capture this phenomenon as part of the Positive Lexicography Project (Lomas, n.d.).

Another scholar focused on the bittersweet, Wong (2011), calls for a “positive psychology 2.0” to recognize the interdependence of the negative and the positive, inviting positive psychologists to incorporate research into the negative in the field of positive psychology. This scholar points to resilience in particular as necessarily recognizing the presence of negative emotions in well-being, since by definition resilience exists and arises out of the starting point of adversity. For Wong (2011), if the ultimate goal of all psychologists is to help people achieve well-being notwithstanding adversity, then the science of well-being must be to “focus on the positive potential of transcending and transforming negative emotions” (p. 75).

Lomas and Ivtzan (2016) champion a “second wave of positive psychology” to reflect the human desire for a more nuanced mix of positive and negative in order to reflect the inevitable interplay between conceptual opposites that are part of the human state. These scholars explain this interplay through a “thesis-antithesis-synthesis” model (citing Lazarus, 2003), whereby the thesis, an initial appraisal of a state (say happiness), is then contrasted to its antithesis, the opposite state (say sadness), resulting in a synthesis that is a co-valenced state “inherently involving complex, intertwined shades of light and dark” (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016, p. 1755).

Of equal interest is how these scholars point to context as being critical to this more nuanced perspective on well-being. For them, the particularities of a situation will be key to finding the right synthesis between dialectical opposites: optimism and pessimism, self-esteem and humility, freedom and restriction, forgiveness and anger, and, most relevant to this capstone, happiness and sadness (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). In this manner, they demonstrate how important Aristotle’s practical wisdom is to navigating the bittersweet of well-being.

Whether or not positive psychology has always acknowledged the coexistence of the negative and the positive in the pursuit of well-being, or a new wave or version 2.0 of positive

psychology is in order, there is increasing recognition in the field of the essential nature of the bittersweet to the inevitable complexity of the good life. As will be further developed below, the opportunity for generating a variety of factors that contribute to well-being by engaging in the act of writing a letter in a time of loss, is a fitting example of the synthesis represented by the bittersweet.

**Grief as an activator for positive emotions.** A last perspective on the necessary coexistence of negative and positive emotions in well-being can be found in the findings by several scholars that the negative emotion of grief, in particular, can generate positive outcomes.

George Vaillant (2008) made the point that grief serves the purpose of “drawing others to the side of the bereaved” (p. 9), which introduces some of the pro-social relationship dynamics at play in condolence letters. In a similar but not identical vein, Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014), acknowledged that sadness helps to persuade others to avoid loss or failure. They offer the example of the use of sad images and stories to increase donations for charitable causes. While these authors go on to advocate – controversially in my opinion – for mild unhappiness over happiness, their approach, together with Vaillant’s, supports the thesis that without grief or sadness, some positive emotions like empathy, comfort and altruism might not be triggered, when they are most needed.

Vaillant (2008) also notes how near-death experiences often give rise to positive emotions like love, joy and awe, a phenomenon that David Yaden explored in his research into what he calls “self-transcendent experiences”, namely short-lived mental states during which the sense of self is reduced and feelings of connectedness are heightened (Yaden, Haidt, Hood, Vago, & Newberg, 2017), which can in turn give rise to increased well-being. According to Yaden’s (2020) most recent data set, it is the connectedness element in self-transcendent

experiences that gives rise to increases in well-being, and it is grief in particular that is at the origins of a majority of the experiences that generate such connectedness.

Nolen-Hoeksema and Davis (2005) point to another positive impact from dramatic loss events. According to their research, such negative events often elicit personal evaluation of purpose in life, by offering perspective or even benefit from loss, which, in turn, can give rise to improved adjustment and reduced distress. These authors also suggest that such major negative events can give rise to growth in character (for example, courage and strength) and/or strengthening of relationships (Nolen-Heoksema & Davis, 2005).

Chris Feudtner's (2009) inspiring work in pediatric palliative care also recognizes the coexistence of the extreme negative (news of a child's fatal illness) with the extreme positive (unconditional parental love). According to his research, positive and negative affect are separate emotional experiences, not just opposite ends of a spectrum, which is what allows them to co-exist. In turn, this coexistence of extreme opposites can give rise to positive adaptations to grief, generativity, empathetic conversations, creative solutions, and opportunities to reconfigure loss (C. Feudtner, personal communication, May 14, 2020), as well as "plurality of hopes" and "re-goaling," phenomena whereby new hopes and/or goals emerge from the loss (Hill et al., 2014).

Lomas and Ivtzan (2016) also recognize the co-existence of the intensity of grief and the intensity of love for bereaved parents as a means of retaining a link with their child after the child's death. The "continuing bonds theory" of bereavement which recognizes the transformation of the physical relationship to a new relationship with the deceased, thereby breaking the bond of death (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007), is one such example. The science of "post-traumatic growth", the positive change arising out of a struggle with very adverse

circumstances developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), is another variation on this phenomenon.

Other scholars have also suggested that sorrow can bring opportunities for finding meaning and connection. For example, in advocating for his positive organizational tool of appreciative inquiry, Cooperrider (2017) notes that this tool is available not only in positive moments, but also:

during moments of tragedy when we are alert to “What new meanings are being made possible here during these moments of magnified meaning making?” or “What new, possible good can emerge from this?” In all of this lurks the reverence for life and the ability to search for things that give life, breathe life, harmonize life, and energize meaning and connection. (p. 131)

In closing this section, I circle back to William James. One modern philosopher (Kaag, 2020) summed up James’ (1874) notion of ‘coming to,’ or waking up to what is present, as a result of grief:

In truth, I suspect tragedy and turmoil have the unintended consequences of disrupting our habitual frames of perception, the instrumental ways that we typically interpret the world, just long enough for what James later called “pure experience” to make an entrance.

Sometimes, it is precisely when one is laid low that momentary, but meaningful, insights have the chance to arise. (pp. 115-116)

In short, not only is there space in positive psychology for negative emotions, but grief in particular can open unique pathways to well-being, from empathy to altruism and purpose, from improved adjustment to increased character strengths, clarity of meaning, and perhaps even

transcendence and transformation.<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging this is key to understanding how writing a condolence letter connects with positive psychology. Before turning to the examples of condolence letters throughout history in **Section II** illustrating this phenomenon, the role of expressive writing, expressions of gratitude, and the gratitude letter provide another important strand in the fabric of understanding the condolence letter from the perspective of positive psychology.

### **Expressive Writing, Gratitude, and the Gratitude Letter**

**Expressive writing as a source of well-being.** Writing is an element common to many positive psychology interventions and has been the subject of considerable study (Rebele, 2010). Pennebaker's (1997) research supports an increase in well-being resulting from engaging in expressive writing about traumatic events, ranging from improved physical and mental health, to improved productivity and academic achievement. Niederhoffer & Pennebaker's (2005) research supports expressive writing's impact from the perspective of sharing one's story. For them, it is the divulgence of a distressing personal event, reflecting the deeply-held human need

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<sup>5</sup> The humanities provide a separate but rich perspective supporting the coexistence of negative and positive emotions, as James recognizes in his essay about Chautauqua cited above. For him, the bittersweet is: "the sort of thing the presence of which inspires us, and the reality of which it seems to be the function of all the higher forms of literature and fine art to bring home to us and suggest." (James, 1900/1967, p. 648). Although the subjectivity that is inherent in appreciation of the humanities distinguishes them from the scientific perspective of positive psychology, there is increasing scholarly attention being brought to the connection between the humanities and human flourishing (Tay, Pawelski, & Keith, 2018). To cite just one commentary to this effect relating to the visual arts, de Botton and Armstrong (2013) note how "a work of particular grace and loveliness that can be, for a moment, heartbreaking", and visual art "reminds us of the legitimate place of sorrow in a good life, so that we panic less about our difficulties and recognize them as part of a noble existence" (p. 17).

to disclose, accentuated by the act of writing, that explains the therapeutic effects and positive impacts on physical and mental health.

King (2001) expands the scope of these findings beyond the negative in her research supporting the health benefits and improved subjective well-being arising from writing about life goals. For her, writing about self-regulation can be as beneficial to improving well-being as writing about negative life events (King, 2001).

Several scholars have explored how expressive writing can help people find meaning. Boud (2001) looked at the effects of journal writing, more particularly as a reflective practice to mold and make sense of raw experience. For Baumeister and Vohs (2002), writing can allow the writer to structure events in ways that might otherwise not have been structured, thus giving rise to insights, connections and context that would not have been available to the writer. Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson (2004) recognized this phenomenon by highlighting writing's impact on academic achievement through its support of learning strategies.

In short, whether as a means of recovering from a traumatic event, setting goals, creating meaning or improving learning, expressive writing has been shown to generate factors that relate to the writer's well-being in a broad variety of ways.

**Gratitude and the gratitude letter.** The positive impact of expressive writing is on particular display in the research on gratitude, the phenomenon of appreciating something or someone who brought value or meaning to oneself (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Many positive interventions designed to increase well-being are related to gratitude, through exercises often referred to as the "three good things exercise" or the "three blessings exercise," whereby a person is invited to reflect on or write down things for which they feel grateful (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). One of the most well-known interventions is the "gratitude letter", the



act of writing a letter to a person expressing thanks for what they brought the writer, which can then form the basis of a “gratitude visit” during which said gratitude letter is delivered. Before turning to the gratitude letter specifically, the research on gratitude itself provides some insight relevant to the issues at hand.

*Gratitude research.* The research on gratitude as a source of well-being, developed initially by Emmons and McCullough (2003), was not specifically focused on the act of writing, but demonstrated in numerous studies that subjective life appraisals resulting from expressions of gratitude generally increased positive affect. In subsequent research, Emmons and Shelton (2005) point to two key ingredients of gratitude: (1) self-actualization through wonder and appreciation of experience, and (2) improved relationships, since gratitude can be perceived as interpersonal gift from another.

Emmons and Shelton (2005) also note how gratitude can emerge from trauma and loss. For them, gratitude permits loss to be transformed into an opportunity for growth. This can occur as a result of contrast (seeing positive events in contrast to painful ones), coping with stress (being grateful for what is not lost), service (being grateful for the opportunity to serve), or redemptive sequences (transformation of an unpleasant circumstance into a positive outcome).<sup>6</sup> In the redemptive sequences examples they cite, these scholars note that grateful people “have consciously taken control by choosing to extract benefits from adversity” (Emmons & Shelton, 2005, p. 468). By acknowledging the bittersweet (the benefits from adversity) together with notions of deliberate action (the consciousness, control and choice), Emmons and Shelton (2005)

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<sup>6</sup> The same redemptive sequences that can be key to generativity, as indicated in the research undertaken by McAdams (2013) in the section on the necessary coexistence of positive and negative emotions in **Section I**.

make a critical link between engagement with gratitude and adversity on one hand, and the attention and action that are at the heart of the origins of positive psychology, on the other hand.

*Gratitude interventions.* In terms of the specifics of gratitude interventions, Seligman puts exercises based on gratitude letters at the forefront of his positive interventions. In *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002) describes the moving experiences of encouraging his students to write testimonials expressing thanks at a “gratitude night” at which both the writer and recipient would be present. In *Flourish*, Seligman (2011) expounds on the gratitude letter itself, including specific details re content (it should be concrete and specific) length (about 300 words), and form (it should be delivered and read in person, without interruption).

The results of the research on the impact of gratitude interventions on well-being are mixed. According to a meta-analysis of research on gratitude interventions by Lomas, Froh, Emmons, Mishra, and Bono (2014), the gratitude visit is the most impactful positive intervention in how it supports improvements in well-being, based on both the emotion it engenders and follow-up behavior. However, the authors recognize, as does Seligman (2011) and Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005), that the benefits are often short-lived, presumably because the exercise is most often a one-time intervention. This suggests that to leverage the impact of gratitude interventions by generating a more lasting effect, the act should become a practice or habit in the manner urged by Aristotle and James.

Finally, there is research that indicates that the gratitude letter’s impact will be increased if it forms part of a social interaction. Lyubormirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, and Sheldon (2011) note the difference in impact between gratitude letters that were written and delivered, and gratitude letters that were written but *not* delivered. They found more lasting effect in the former, but none in the latter, concluding that the gratitude visit “may only have lasting positive

effects when both the psychological (writing letter) and social (delivering letter) mechanisms of the intervention are at work” (p. 9). This highlights the importance of the connection between the writer and the recipient and the relationship-building aspects of condolence letters that will be developed below.

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Positive psychology offers several pathways through which to view condolence letters, from the origins of the science itself and the resulting focus on attention, context and action, through the coexistence of the positive and the negative believed by many to be essential to the good life, to expressive writing and gratitude interventions. Many of the condolence letters written throughout history provide examples of precisely these pathways.

## **(II) The Condolence Letter**

### **The Many Factors that Influence the Condolence Letter**

Engaging in the activity of writing a condolence letter can cover a large spectrum of purposes: acknowledging news of a death, respecting perceived social formalities, or transmitting information; expressing immediate grief and sharing of sorrow; recognizing the qualities of and recalling stories about the deceased; and consoling by advocating ways of healing from loss, be it through faith, philosophy, or simply the passage of time. Condolence letters can also serve to promote meaning, encourage reflection on legacies, develop relationships, and, for some, achieve other positive outcomes or personal ends.

Condolence letters can take on an additional purpose when they act as a substitute for physical presence. This purpose is rendered more acute when presence at the bedside or at a funeral service is not possible, as was often the case throughout history (Rea, 1986; Younes, 2017; Dunkelman, n.d.). This factor may also be particularly relevant today, given the restrictions on in-person gatherings both at the bedside and for funeral services due to Covid-19, calling for another outlet for transmission of both emotion and information.

In addition to these many possible purposes, the particular circumstances of every condolence letter will necessarily vary significantly.

First, there are the people involved. At first glance, condolence letters involve the trio of actors mentioned above: the writer, the recipient and the deceased. But there may be other actors or forces involved (persons related to this trio, the press, posterity).

Second, different levels of bereavement and intimacy will impact the condolence letter. Writing to parents about the loss of their child will be different than writing to an adult about the loss of an aged parent; writing to someone one knows will be different from writing to someone one does not know, just as writing *about* someone one knows will be different from writing about someone one does not know; writing about loss to a community or nation will differ from more personal loss; and, finally, the extent of the writer's own personal sense of bereavement will also come into play.

A third group of factors that will impact a condolence letter will come from the situation surrounding the death: its cause, timing, and the particular circumstances (such as the length and degree of illness, death on the battlefield, death in childbirth, by accident or suicide).

Each of these purposes, factors and circumstances, and the infinite number of possible permutations thereof, will create a unique context that will determine the appropriate content,

form and, ultimately, the impact of the letters, as will be illustrated in the review of selected condolence letters throughout history below.

### **Examples of Condolence Letters Throughout Modern History**

The desire to express shared sorrow over and console for the loss of a deceased has been acted upon by writing condolence letters for thousands of years. However, while some groups of condolence letters have been the subject of scholarly or literary review and/or social commentary, and there are many anthologies, articles and blogs that bring together examples of condolence letters, I am not aware of any complete survey of condolence letters over modern history. Conducting such a survey is beyond the scope of this capstone, but I have reviewed some of the primarily Western sources that have attracted study in this area, from Roman history at the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium, to the Egyptian papyri (Greek and Muslim) of the 4<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, to letters from cultural and political figures in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I have tried to identify the themes emerging from a sampling of these letters over time that evoke the connections between positive psychology and condolence letters.

**The Romans.** The writings of ancient Romans are the most-cited examples of what constitute the first known condolence letters. The oldest is reportedly from Servius Sulpicius (105 BC – 45 BC), an orator, jurist and governor of Greece, to Roman statesman, lawyer and philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC), written upon the death of Cicero’s 21-year old daughter Tullia, who died giving birth to her second child in 45 BC (Harris, 2009; Wilcox, 2005). Sulpicius’ letter starts with what will emerge as a common theme in condolence letters, namely excusing his absence in person “if I had been at home, I should not have failed to be at your side, and should have made my sorrow plain to you face to face” (Harris, 2009, pp.

89-90). Sulpicius advises Cicero on how to conduct himself, and counsels the passage of time, another common theme of many condolence letters:

Do not forget that you are Cicero, and a man accustomed to instruct and advise others; and do not imitate bad physicians, who in the diseases of others profess to understand the art of healing, but are unable to prescribe for themselves. Rather suggest to yourself and bring home to your own mind the very maxims which you are accustomed to impress upon others. There is no sorrow beyond the power of time at length to diminish and soften; it is a reflection on you that you should wait for this period, and not rather anticipate that result by the aid of your wisdom. (Harris, 2009, pp. 189-190)

Sulpicius goes on to entreat Cicero to bear his bad fortune with the same “noble dignity” (Harris, 2009, p. 189-190) with which he bore his good fortune, so as not to reveal himself in an unmanly light (Baltussen, 2013).

(Equally interesting is Cicero’s own writing in reaction to the death of his daughter, through a particular format he developed known as *consolatio*, an essay written to console himself. His *Consolatio ad se* has only been recovered in fragments reconstituted from Cicero’s writings to his friend Atticus, but was reportedly some 20 to 40 pages long (Baltussen, 2013). Ultimately, Cicero’s consolation became a philosophical treatise (“For my part, my endurance of this and all other evils that can befall a human being, makes me feel profoundly grateful to philosophy which not only distracts my thoughts from anxiety, but also arms me against all the slings and arrows of fortune” (Baltussen, 2013, p. 70). While Cicero’s *Consolatio ad se* is not strictly speaking a condolence letter of the type reviewed for this capstone since it was not destined for a separate recipient, what makes it noteworthy for these purposes is the writer’s expressed intention of using writing as a tool to feel better (Thomas, 2016; Baltussen, 2013).

Writing may also have been an outlet permitting a full expression of Cicero's grief, which would have been perceived to be inappropriate given his public persona (Hope, 2017), or unmanly, as Sulpicius had cautioned against. Cicero's self-consolation also ends with a commitment to consecrate his daughter's memory by building some kind of edifice (which the *Consolatio ad se* may have replaced), a theme echoed in other letters of condolence, representing the writer's desire to create something of permanence in a time of loss.)

Another Roman writer and philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (also known as Seneca the Younger) (4 BC- 65 AD), developed the medium established by Cicero, with three *consolatio*s, the most well-known being *Consolatio ad Helviam*. Seneca consoles his mother Helvia – briefly – for the death of her grandson (Seneca's own son), mentioning that he “had only just raised his head after burying his child”, but more lengthily for Seneca's own exile to Corsica (resulting from his adulterous relationship with Julia Livilla, the emperor Claudius' niece) (Popova, 2017b).

Several elements of Seneca's *Consolatio ad Helviam*, are worthy of note. First, he addresses the issue of the timing of his missive:

I realized that your grief should not be intruded upon while it was fresh and agonizing, in case the consolations themselves should rouse and inflame it. . . . So I was waiting until your grief of itself should lose its force and, being softened by time to endure remedies, it would allow itself to be touched and handled. (Popova, 2017b)

Second, expressing another theme that runs through many condolence letters, Seneca expresses the difficulties in finding the right words:

A man lifting his head from the very funeral pyre must need some novel vocabulary not drawn from ordinary everyday condolence to comfort his own dear ones. But every great

and overpowering grief must take away the capacity to choose words, since it often stifles the voice itself.

Third, the *Consolatio ad Helviam* seeks to console both the writer (confirming the healing effect of writing advocated by Cicero) and the recipient (his mother), but, except for a few moving words, this condolence letter devotes relatively little attention to Seneca's son (Helvia's grandson), reflecting generally the Romans' minimal attention to the deceased in their condolences. Like the *consolatio* of his elder, Cicero, Seneca evolves his consolatory essay into a presentation of his philosophical views (Stoicism) and commentary on the complex political/social relations of the times. In this manner, the *Consolatio ad Helviam* represents Seneca's proposed remedy for grief: intellectual pursuits. Just as Serpicius prescribed wisdom and the passage of time, Seneca implores his mother to study: "I am leading you to that resource which must be the refuge of all who are flying from Fortune, liberal studies. They will heal your wound, they will withdraw all your melancholy . . . keep you safe . . . [and] comfort you" (Popova, 2017b).

In short, the Romans struggled for the right words in their condolences, expressed regret at absence, opined on the timing of condolences, and advocated (intellectual) action to vanquish grief (Ker, 2011).

**The Greek and Muslim Papyri.** The next major source of condolence letters subject to scholarly study appears in examples of papyri discovered in Egypt dating back to the first centuries AD. These painstakingly reconstituted, translated and interpreted papyri letters develop some of the themes which emerged from the Roman letters, and evidence the introduction of the practical into the condolence letter.



A first group is made up of some ten Greek papyri found in Egypt dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Most of the condolences relate to the death of children, it being surmised that the more unusual nature of these events (as opposed to the death of an adult) merited a letter of condolence on papyri (Worp, 1995). However, what makes these letters remarkable is a certain matter-of-fact tone and content intermingled with expressions of sympathy for the recipient. The texts pass from words of comfort to routine matters, such as news concerning a garment, the loss of a slave, or other aspects of personal property (Worp, 1995). The letters also mix expressions of sadness and distress with concerns for future well-being of the recipient, in particular regarding their financial situation (Younes, 2017).

One letter on papyri of the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century or early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD recalls the difficulties of being present in person to justify the letter:

If the responsibilities that now fall upon me were not of such kind and such importance as to be inexorable, I should have abandoned everything and come to you myself, both to salute you and to talk – especially to (our) sister – about the mortal blow that has befallen your daughter. (Rea, 1986, p. 76)

This letter also reflects the expectation that men should handle grief better than women (grief being “womanish”), echoing Sulpicius’ concerns that grieving would be perceived to be unmanly, and advocates action, exhorting the couple to “do something, or to not do something” (Rea, 1986, p. 78).

There are also a few condolence letters in papyri from the Early Muslim society in Egypt (6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries). These letters have the common denominator of recalling the inevitability of death (one letter stating simply that “death is the fate of all mankind,” Younes, 2017, p. 73),

offering blessings and prayers, but most noteworthy, prescribing patience as salvation (Younes, 2017).

Like the Romans' condolences, these relatively rare papyri letters contain some of the same themes of regretted absence and advocating the passage of time and action, but also deal with practicalities. The papyri condolences also illustrate the more ancient tendency to focus more on the recipient than on the deceased. In fact, the papyri condolences are themselves illustrations of a dialectical mix of opposites in times of loss: a mix of expressions of sympathy (although with relatively little emotion) with practicalities, and a call for both patience and action.

**18th century.** Condolence letters in 18<sup>th</sup> century literary history constitute a rich source of insights into the practice. Court poet, playwright, historian and Enlightenment philosopher, François-Louis Arouet, better known under his penname, Voltaire (1694-1778), had an extensive epistolary practice which reflected many of the contextual challenges of the intrigues of the 18<sup>th</sup> century European court and intellectual circles. His letters form an interesting contrast to a very different style of letter penned across the English channel, by writer, poet and essayist, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784); and across the Atlantic, by writer, publisher, inventor, and statesman, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790).

As Thomas Carr's (1996) thoughtful scholarship shows, the variety of Voltaire's condolence letters highlights the different demands of context, from the formal exigencies of etiquette and civility required to acknowledge receipt of news of death, to the need for a short note dashed off in the heat of the moment to demonstrate immediate shared emotion, to a longer letter containing more thoughtful reflection and consolation, and, for literary figures like Voltaire, a few (or more) lines of poetry. Indeed, Voltaire was often pressured – if not outright

ordered – to write some verse in addition to his expression of sympathy. One recipient pleaded for just four lines,<sup>7</sup> but the thirty-four lines Voltaire wrote to King Frederick the Great on the demise of his sister were deemed insufficient, and Voltaire was directed to write a longer and (in translation) “more showy and public” poem (Carr, 1996, p. 133)! This being said, even Voltaire struggled to find the right words, when he mentions the impossibility of “calming such a violent passion as grief through words alone” (Carr, 1996, p. 139).

Voltaire’s letters also often served his own purposes of patronage or the development of other more intimate bonds with the recipient. This could make the exercise particularly delicate, requiring Voltaire to balance praise of the deceased and praise of the recipient. He also had to arbitrate between suggesting that the recipient had the strength to overcome the loss, and allowing that the pain of loss might be anything but eternal. This being said, Voltaire did not always excel in discretion. Carr (1996) points to multiple examples in Voltaire’s condolence letters that would seem insensitive, at best, such as when he consoled parents on the death of a newborn with the idea that this loss could be quickly repaired, or averted with the milk of a “robust peasant woman for the next infant” (p. 142). Voltaire’s frequent references to unrelated topics in his condolence letters provide further examples of this failing, like mentioning the loss of another friend, his own health, or his amorous pursuits (Carr, 1996). Indeed, as these letters demonstrate, Voltaire was often more focused on himself, with the recipient coming in second, and the deceased a distant third.

Putting these lapses of practical wisdom aside, there are several other factors that deserve mention in Voltaire’s letters. The first is his call to resilience and virtue. For Voltaire,

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<sup>7</sup> Madame du Deffand wrote to him (in translation): “But sir, why do you refuse a word of praise of my friend?... Four lines of yours, either in poetry or in prose, would honor his memory and for me would be a real consolation.” (Carr, 1996, p. 133)

“consolation meant resilience, not resignation,” and “[b]y searching out and cultivating the good that coexists with evil, suffering can at least be alleviated” (Carr, 1996, p. 143). Second, expressing emotion was no longer to be avoided as a threat to manliness; Voltaire’s letters contain frequent references to his own pain, copious tears and grieving heart. Third, like the Romans, Voltaire proposes philosophy as a consolation in some letters, closing one letter to a widow with the words “adieu, courage and philosophy,” although he recognizes in other letters that “all your philosophy cannot remove your grief. Philosophy assuages the wounded, and leaves the heart wounded” (Carr, 1996, p. 141). Fourth, his condolence letters bear witness to his strong emphasis how sympathy feeds social bonds, and in particular friendship. According to Carr (1996), the “exhilaration that Voltaire found in struggling against evil made it natural for him to find courage in philosophy and to seek the compensation of friendship that makes losses bearable” (p. 143).

A more English approach is on display in a letter written by Samuel Johnson in 1750 to his friend and publisher James Elphinston, on the loss of Elphinston’s mother, filled with simple wisdom: “the business of life summons us away from useless grief, and calls us to the exercise of those virtues of which we are lamenting out deprivation” (Harris, 2009, pp. 184-185). He offers consolation in the spiritual belief of togetherness in the afterlife:

[T]here is something pleasing in the belief that our separating from those whom we love is merely corporeal; and it may be a great incitement to virtuous friendship, if it can be made probable that that union that has received diving approbation shall continue to eternity. (Harris, 2009, pp. 184-185)

Of equal interest is the particular cathartic (and potentially generative) action that Johnson prescribes for his friend, namely, writing:

There is one expedient by which you may in some degree continue her presence. If you write down minutely what you remember of her from your earliest years, you will read it with great pleasure, and receive from it many hints of soothing recollection, when time shall remove her yet further from you, and your grief shall be matured to veneration.

(Harris, 2009, pp. 184-185)

Even farther from the complexities of the court and literary circles of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, in the British colony on the other side of the Atlantic, Benjamin Franklin's letters also tended more to the simple and the spiritual. Although known as a rational thinker, in an oft-cited condolence letter on the death of his brother to his niece in 1756, Franklin reminded her how the body can become an encumbrance to the spirit when it is no longer fit for its purpose, and, like Johnson, how the living will soon join the deceased:

Our friend and we are invited abroad on a party of pleasure – that is to last forever – His chair was first ready and he is gone before us – we could not all conveniently start together, and why should you and I be grieved at this, since we are soon to follow, and we know where to find him. (Harris, 1999, pp. 163-164)

In this manner, taking a very different tack from his peer in France, Franklin called on elements of hope and relationships that find their origins in many of the elements of modern positive psychology. Nonetheless, viewed together, these 18<sup>th</sup> century letters illustrate most of all the introduction of strong feelings to the previous mix of messages, showing that expressing emotion had become acceptable.

**19<sup>th</sup> century.** The 19<sup>th</sup> century provides another rich source of condolence letters, particularly in the United States, evidencing a shift to the more spiritual, a focus on the character of the deceased, and in some cases, a return to including more informational aspects.

An early example of the spiritual can be found in the letter from Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) to John Adams on the death of his wife Abigail in 1818. In a relatively brief letter, Jefferson touched on his own understanding of grief: “Tried myself, in the school of affliction, by the loss of every form of connection which can rive the human heart, I know well, and feel what you have lost, what you have suffered, are suffering and have yet to endure.” (Harris, 1999, p. 219). Jefferson eschews much consolation, saying “time and silence are the only medicines,” and offers comfort in the hope for an afterlife similar to that expressed seventy years early by his compatriot, Franklin, that both writer and recipient will soon “ascend in essence to an ecstatic meeting with the friends we have loved and lost and whom we shall still love and never lose again.” (Harris, 1999, p. 219).

A large body of 19<sup>th</sup> century condolence letters comes from the United States Civil War (1861-1865), and indeed some scholars have opined that the tradition of condolence letters in the United States today found its origins in those times (Nobel, 2011). The deathbed was a sacred place of witnessing and accompanying death in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the Civil War often rendered that tradition impossible, the condolence letter took its place, and the family of the deceased soldier was informed of the specific circumstances of the death that they would otherwise not know. In words that resonate particularly today, one scholar wrote that these letters “sought to make absent loved ones virtual witnesses to the dying moments they had been denied” (Gilpin Faust, 2008).

As a result, many of the Civil War letters addressed the physical circumstances of the demise in graphic detail, sparing little in terms of physical ailments, from “scrofula and general debility” caused by sub-standard food, to “bowel complaints, typhoid fever, delirium, and death” (Dunkelman, n.d). Sometimes this candor evinced what was probably the writer’s lack of

maturity (and/or a taste for the gruesome, particularly in the Southern imagination, Barton, 1979). Truman A. St. John wrote to the parents of William Sprague, “he was the sickest boy I ever saw”, adding “He was as crazy as a loon.” James W. Phelps wrote of musician soldier Thaddeus L. Reynolds that “you could have no difficulty in identifying the body from certain peculiarities,” and B. Locke spared no niceties in writing to James David Rumph, a father of a fallen Southern soldier who “had decayed so much that it was utterly impossible for anyone to recognize him... I never saw decomposition proceed as rapidly in my life” (Dunkelman, n.d.).

These uniquely American letters also served to address various logistical issues, from the return of personal effects, to requests for instructions and funds for burials or return of the bodies, outstanding wages, etc. Here too, the language used could contain some jarring content, such as when Corydon C. Rugg wrote to the widow and mother of two soldiers killed in battle, “It would be more difficult to find your son than your husband and you might as well look for a gold dollar in the sea as to try to find either of them” (Dunkelman, n.d.).

But the Civil War letters were also sentimental in their consolations, with a particular focus on the essential traits of character of the deceased, what positive psychology today would qualify as character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Niemic, 2019), a focus less present in the earlier historical letters.

One scholar’s analysis of letters from the Confederate side notes that the Southern style letters tended to be more romantic, sentimental and consoling (and more numerous), compared to a more controlled tone and number of the letters emanating from the Union soldiers (Barton, 1979). The quality of being *noble* was that used most often to describe the deceased in the Confederate letters, appearing in more than half the letters reviewed; with the words *gallant* and *gentleman* coming in a close second (Barton, 1979). Whether these choices were formulaic or

truly reflected the most revered character strengths of those times is open to question, but there can be no doubt that the intention was to convey a glorified memory of the deceased soldier.

Another scholar analyzed a sample letters relating to soldiers had been part of the 154<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Infantry from New York counties Cattaraugus and Chautauqua<sup>8</sup> and who served – and died – in Maryland, Virginia and Georgia (Dunkelman, n.d.). These letters also referred to the fundamental character traits of the deceased, often highlighted by claims of purity, bravery, kindness, moral character and Christianity, in addition to nobility. Thus, 18-year old Wilber Moore was recalled as being a “noble young man” of “pure and innocent character”, and the death of Jesse D. Campbell, who accidentally shot himself with his musket, was recorded in similar terms: “Thus perished one of the noblest and bravest of soldiers, and a virtuous and ever faithful Christian”, whose “moral purity of his character and his ever kind and genial disposition had endeared him to all his comrades in arms . . . and will ever cherish his memory as one of the bravest and truest of the many who have fallen in this bitter contest.” Similarly, soldier Almon L. Gile’s “moral character, his social qualities, his zealous performance of his duties, and whole bearing as a soldier & a man” were reported to his family (Dunkelman, n.d.).

Finally, the language of many Civil War letters illustrates the strong bonds that had been established between the writer and the deceased, which also served to strengthen the social connections among the surviving. Thus, Nathaniel S. Brown wrote to the family about the death of Eason W. Bull: “It is with trembling hand and an aching heart that I address you with a silent pen,” and Alfred Benson wrote about the death of Jesse Campbell that “We mourn the departed as a brother” (Dunkelman, n.d.).

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<sup>8</sup> Chautauqua was the town William James wrote about being both perfect and bland some 40 years later.



The Civil War also gave rise to the practice of United States Presidents writing condolence letters, starting with Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865). Lincoln was particularly known for his condolence letters, inspired, perhaps, by the numerous tragic losses that punctuated his own life: the death of his mother at an early age, his sister and son (Goodwin, 2005). The most well-known of his condolence letters was to Lydia Bixby, the mother of five sons who had supposedly all perished in the Civil War, although it subsequently emerged that at least one of the sons had deserted and another was honorably discharged (Harris, 2009; Lord, 2017): “I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.” He continued on to offer prayers and the “cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom” (Harris, 2009, p. 177). Lincoln’s sparing use of language successfully conveyed both emotion and empathy, capturing the contextual needs of the circumstance and exemplifying the expression of appropriate affect.

Equally touching are Lincoln’s letters about the deceased he knew personally. Writing to the parents about the qualities of their deceased son, he hoped “that it may be no intrusion upon the sacredness of your sorrow [...] to address you this tribute to the memory of my young friend, and your brave and early fallen child” (Lord, 2017). And, to the daughter of a friend who died, he wrote about the benefits of time, suggesting that she would feel better, and that “the memory of your dear Father, instead of an agony, will yet be a sad sweet feeling in your heart, of a purer and holier sort than you have known before” (Popova, 2017a).

Expressions of feeling and a focus on character strengths (with some deathbed details) also emerge in letters written by 19<sup>th</sup> century European cultural figures.

A letter from English naturalist, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), to his wife Emma on the death of their eldest daughter (one of ten children) in 1851, is an example of the conveying of some basic information regarding the death and character traits of the deceased, but most of all a heart-wrenching expression of shared sorrow and renewed bonds between the grieving couple:

My dear dearest Emma. I pray Fanny's note may have prepared you. She went to her final sleep most tranquilly, most sweetly at 12 oclock today. Our poor dear dear child has had a very short life but I trust happy, & God only knows what miseries might have been in store for her. She expired without a sigh. How desolate it makes one to think of her frank cordial manners. I am so thankful for the daguerreotype. I cannot remember every seeing the dear child naughty. God bless her. We must be more & more to each other my dear wife – Do what you can to bear up & think how invariable kind & tender you have been to her... My own poor dear dear wife. (Popova, 2017a)

The German composer Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) wrote to Clara Schumann, the widow of his mentor Robert Schumann, in 1857, exhorting her to move forward after a year of bereavement, but the letter contains a subtext evoking the long and deep bond between writer and recipient:

My dear Clara, you really must try hard to keep your melancholy within bounds and see that it does not last too long. Life is precious and such moods as the one you are in consume us body and soul. Do not imagine that life has little more in store for you. It is not true... The more you endeavor to go through times of sorrow calmly and accustom yourself to do so, the more you will enjoy the happier times that are sure to follow. What do you suppose that man was given the divine gift of hope? And you do not even need to be anxious in your hope, for you know perfectly well that pleasant months will follow

your present unpleasant ones, just as they do in every period of unhappiness. (Popova, 2017a)

Finally, going back to the exhortations to action of the ancient Greeks, English writer and social commentator Charles Dickens (1812-1870) counseled his younger sister, Letitia, on the death her husband in 1862, to be active in any way possible:

The one influencing consideration in all you do as to your disposition of yourself (coupled of course, with a real earnest strenuous endeavor to recover the lost tone of spirit) is, that you think and feel you can do. . . . I rather hope it is likely that through such restlessness you will come to a far quieter frame of mind. The disturbed mind and affections, like the tossed sea, seldom calm without an intervening time of confusion and trouble. But nothing is to be attained without striving. In a determined effort to settle the thoughts, to parcel out the day, to find occupation regularly or to make it, to be up and doing something, are chiefly to be found the mere mechanical means which must come to the aid of the best mental efforts. (Popova, 2017a)

In this manner, Darwin, Brahms and Dickens unknowingly all built on a trend that emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century of what are today seen as essential tenets of positive psychology, the importance of expressing emotion and developing relationships, and continued the call to action of their forefathers.

**20<sup>th</sup> century.** These tenets find their place in the next century as well, but with an expanded scope of possible consolations to include gratitude for what the deceased enjoyed during their life, consolations in life's simple pleasures, and the possibility of legacy and generativity.

A first example is the letter penned by Albert Einstein (1879-1955) to Queen Elisabeth of Belgium in 1934 upon the death of her husband (shortly followed by the death of her daughter-in-law), which contains a perspective on consolation for early and unexpected loss: “And yet we should not grieve for those who have gone from us in the prime of their lives after happy and fruitful years of activity, and who have been privileged to accomplish in full measure their task in life.” (Tippett, 2010, pp. 17-18, Popova, 2017a)). Einstein goes on to suggest concrete sources of consolation in the simple pleasure of life, from youth to spring sunshine and the beauty of music:

Something there is that can refresh and revivify older people; joy in the activities of the younger generation – a joy, to be sure, that is clouded by dark forebodings in these unsettled times. And yet, as always, the springtime sun brings forth new life, and we may rejoice because of this new life and contribute to its unfolding; and Mozart remains as beautiful and tender as he always was and always will be. There is, after all, something eternal that lies beyond the hand of fate and of all human delusions. And such eternal lies closer to an older person than to a younger one oscillating between fear and hope. For us, there remains the privilege of experience beauty in truth in their purest forms. (Tippett, 2010, pp. 17-18; Popova, 2017a)

The suicide of Virginia Woolf in 1941 elicited several emotion-filled condolences to her husband. T. S. Eliot conveyed his immediate shock:

I only learned the news yesterday afternoon when I was in London, having had no previous intimation. For myself and others it is the end of a world. I merely feel quite numb at the moment, and can't think about this or anything else, but I want you to know that you are as constantly in my mind as in anyone's. (Popova, 2013)

Edith Sitwell captured, in relatively simple terms, Woolf's essential traits and legacy:

When I think of that noble and high spirit and mind!

There isn't anything one can say, and one must not intrude on your sorrow. But all my life I shall remember the feeling of light, and of happiness, that she gave one. As a person, as well as in her art. Everything seemed worthwhile, important, and beautiful. (Popova, 2013)

The 20<sup>th</sup> century also offered a new series of Presidential condolence letters arising out of the Vietnam War or other national tragedies. President Lyndon Johnson wrote to the parents of astronaut Gus Grissom of their son's strength of spirit and cool confidence in the space program, but also raising the idea of generativity, by writing "By his courage, skill and dedication, he has guaranteed future generations a knowledge of the universe that will enrich their lives on earth" (Lord, 2017). President Nixon also evoked generativity, when writing to the parents of a soldier killed in Vietnam: "Those who give their own lives to make the freedom of others possible live forever in honor" (Lord, 2017).

By far the largest outpouring of condolence letters relating to a United States President were those sent to Jacqueline Kennedy upon the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Out of some 1.5 million condolence letters received, some 1500 remain and form part of the John F. Kennedy Library. As one collection of nine heartfelt condolences (often in the form of telegrams) illustrates, many of these expressions of sympathy conveyed the legacy of the deceased, as well as his essential character traits (Kaczynski, 2013). Some are particularly poignant as the writers would themselves lose their lives in the same manner in the years to come.

- Martin Luther King (1929-1968):

MAY GOD GIVE YOU AND YOUR FAMILY THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE YOU NEED IN THIS HOUR OF BEREAVEMENT WE PRAY THAT YOU MAY TAKE COURAGE IN THE FACT THAT YOU KNEW A GREAT MAN SO INTIMATELY A MAN WHO THOUGH YOUNG IN YEARS AND WHO SERVED HIS COUNTRY AS PRESIDENT FOR SUCH A SHORT WHILE HAS LEFT MAGNIFICENT IMPRINT ON THE PAGES OF HISTORY HIS DEDICATION TO PEACE AND JUSTICE AND HIS ENERGETIC EFFORT TO ACHIEVE THESE ENDS PLACES HIM BESIDE THE GREATEST OUR COUNTRY AND THE WORLD WILL LONG REMEMBER HIM

- Indira Gandhi (1917-1984):

Seldom has an event shocked and stunned the whole world as did the tragedy which took place a fortnight ago. I wonder if there is another instance in history where a single individual has so symbolized the hopes and aspirations of such divergent groups and sections of people spread all over the world. President Kennedy's great courage and other dynamic qualities have been eulogized and have inspired admiration and respect, but it was the warmth and essential humanness of his personality which evoked friendship and affection.

If we who knew him but lately and from a distance have felt his loss so keenly, we can well imagine the effect on his own family.

Many a time I have sat down to write, but no words have come, or rather, words have seemed wholly inadequate to express even a part of our feelings. At this time of shock

and deep sorrow, you yourself have risen to great heights and by your courage and dignity have given strength to us all.

Other condolences came from cultural figures, with their brevity nevertheless conveying deep emotion. Ezra Pound wrote in a telegram a short poetic missive:

GREAT GRIEF TO ALL MEN OF GOOD WILL HEARTFELT CONDOLEANCES  
GREAT MAN AND PRESIDENT

Duke Ellington's telegram also conveys emotion and loss:

NOT AS MUCH AS YOU AND YOUR FAMILY BUT WE AND MANY WHO  
BELIEVED IN HIS RIGHTNESS TODAY  
SUFFER THE GREAT LOSS OF YOUR GREAT MAN.

A last example of another brief but forceful and deeply personal condolence to Jacqueline Kennedy is the telegram she received from General MacArthur:

I REALIZE THE UTTER FUTILITY OF WORDS AT SUCH A TIME, BUT THE  
WORLD OF CIVILIZATION SHARES THE POIGNANCY OF THIS  
MONUMENTAL TRAGEDY. AS A FORMER COMRADE IN ARMS, HIS DEATH  
KILLS SOMETHING WITHIN ME.

I close these examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century condolence letters with one letter that uses storytelling and evocation of place, written in 1951 by Steward Stern, writer of the screenplay of *Rebel Without a Cause*, to the family of James Dean following the funeral held in Dean's hometown of Fairmount, Indiana (Usher, 2013). Stern conveys emotion and meaning through his description of the funeral and the land and people of Dean's origins:

I shall never forget that silent town on that particular sunny day. And I shall never forget the care with which people set their feet down – so carefully on the pavements – as if the

sound of a suddenly scraped heel might disturb the sleep of a boy who slept soundly. And the whispering. Do you remember one voice raised beyond a whisper in all those reverential hours of goodbye? A whole town struck silent, a whole town with love filling its throat, a whole town wondering why there had been so little time in which to give the love away. . . .

Nor shall I forget the land he grew on or the stream he fished, or the straight, strong, gentle people whom he loved to talk about into the nights when he was away from them. His great-grandma's eyes have seen half of America's history, his grandparents, his father, his treasured three of you – four generations for the oiling of a spring – nine decades of living evidence of seed, of turning earth, of opening kernel. It was a solid background and one to be envied. The spring, released, flung him into our lives and out again. He burned an unforgettable mark in the history of his art and changed it as surely as Duse, in her time, changed it.

Stern goes on in his letter to emphasize the theme of the bittersweet, finding meaning in the tragic loss by highlighting how the positive can only exist in contrast to the negative:

So few things blaze. So little is beautiful. Our world doesn't seem equipped to contain its brilliance too long. Ecstasy is only recognizable when one has experienced pain. Beauty only exists when set against ugliness. Peace is not appreciated without war ahead of it. How we wish that life could support only the good. But it vanishes when its opposite no longer exists in a setting. It is a white marble on unmelting snow. (Usher, 2013, pp. 135-136)

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As this brief overview of a sampling of condolence letters throughout history has tried to show, notwithstanding the broad range of factors and circumstances reflecting first and foremost the importance of context, there are many common themes that emerge. The writers regret their absence in person; they struggle with finding the right words, and, in older letters, they deal with informational and logistical issues and sometimes their own personal interests. But the writers also write to feel better themselves; they express and share emotion; they highlight character strengths of the deceased; they enhance social bonds; they propose tools for overcoming grief ranging from faith and patience to action and philosophy; they search for meaning; and they envisage legacies and promote generativity. Before turning to how these common themes are deeply linked to positive psychology, a review of the relatively limited research relating to condolence letters is in order.

### **(III) Empirical Research into Condolence Missives**

Some writers, including myself, have just come out and admitted that writing condolence letters made them feel better:

- I felt momentarily better after finishing each condolence letter, not because I had any conviction of having provided genuine consolation, but because by setting down words on paper, I had preserved something ephemeral, endangered. Emotions were pinned to the page like rare butterflies, no longer flapping around indiscriminately, glimpsed only as they fluttered off, but preserved for future study. (Thomas, 2016)
- I do not know if the condolence letters I wrote helped the people I wrote to. I suspect they didn't. The task was simply too large. But I felt momentarily better after finishing each condolence letter. (Austerlitz, 2014)

There is however unfortunately little empirical evidence to support these anecdotal reports of the relationship between writing condolence letters and well-being. I am aware of only two areas where there has been some scholarly research into expressions of condolence. The first more scientific research has been in the medical space, and more specifically regarding letters written by medical personnel (most often oncologists, but also palliative care specialists and intensive care unit doctors and nurses) to the families of patients who have died under their care. While these situations and the goals of the research are quite distinct from the issues analyzed in this capstone, there is some overlap that sheds some light on the issues at hand. The second category of research consists of studies conducted in 1980, 1983 and 1998 that measured participants' views on the related subject of sympathy cards.

### **The Medical Arena**

Although research into bereavement is challenging for a variety of ethical and logistical reasons (Meert et al., 2008), scholars have explored the impact of condolence letters written by medical personnel to families following the death of a patient in their care in several different Western countries (and Israel), demonstrating similar concerns across cultures.

As a preliminary matter, like the Civil War letters, there can be a strong informational aspect of this communication, anticipating that family members will want greater understanding of what happened: "knowing the truth appears to be an important part of the bereavement process in Western cultures" (Thrane & Jones, 2012, Literature Review, para. 1). Moreover, as a general matter, the primary purpose of this research has been to understand the impact on the recipients, namely, the family of deceased, and, only secondarily, the impact on the writer.

According to one study of pediatric oncologists in the United States, the physician's contact with the family of a deceased was generally associated with the belief that this would help the family or, to a lesser extent, the physician (Borasino, Morrison, Nelson, Silverman, & Feudtner, 2008). Another study of nurses in the United States found that writing a condolence letter could provide welcome closure, the chance to bond with the families, and, in some cases, an opportunity to address their own grief and even generate a sense of personal growth (Thrane & Jones, 2012).

A study in Canada considered the practices of oncologists and palliative care specialists where bereavement follow-up (phone calls, attending funerals, and the sending of a condolence letter or card) was not routine. Engagement with such follow-up was more likely to occur with female practitioners and palliative care specialists, medical personnel who work in an academic setting, or where there was some perceived responsibility to engage in such follow-up (Chau, Zimmerman, Ma, Taback, & Krzyzanowska, 2009).

A United Kingdom study of oncologists and palliative care consultants confirmed the practice of sending condolence letters, but less than half of the respondents said it was standard practice (Hayward, Makinde & Vasudev, 2016). Interestingly, the practitioners were not favorable to using a template, nor to the introduction of a policy to unify practices, indicating that the practice remains highly individualized.

An Israeli study of oncologists analyzed the level of participation in face-to-face interactions (attendance of visitation, funerals or other services) versus indirect interactions (calls, letters or emails) with the families of their deceased patients. The results showed that participation in both kinds of interactions was sporadic, with condolence letters sent only occasionally, more likely when there was a special bond with the patient (Corn et al., 2010).

This research highlighted the grief of both the families and of the physician, the need for physicians to find an appropriate way to address their own sense of loss, but also the complexities presented by the perceived need to respect the boundaries of the physician/patient relationship.

Some studies focused on bereavement support generally indicated a positive impact for the families and, to a lesser degree, the physicians, but observed that letter writing was not frequent (Borasino, Morrison, Silberman, Nelson, & Feudtner, 2008; Thrane & Jones, 2012).

However, two French studies indicated that the impact of condolence letters on families was not always positive. One found that reaching out to the families in this manner not only failed to reduce the family members' grief, it may have increased their depression and PTSD (Kentish-Barnes et al., 2017). A second study determined that condolence letters could trigger a reliving of the grief or regret about the hospital experience, or give rise to a sense of broken promises and/or create stress of a perceived obligation to respond (Long & Curtis, 2017). The authors of the second study cautioned against routine mailings, over-committing on proposed follow-up or creating any sense of an obligation on the family's part to respond, highlighting the need for practical wisdom here as well.

A final perspective from a medical point of view emerges from one doctor's article expressing his regret at what he calls the "dying art" of the doctor's letter of condolence (Kane, 2007). Kane sees these letters as an opportunity to enhance relationships between physicians and the patients they serve, to show respect for the deceased and to make family members feel that they matter (Kane, 2007).<sup>9</sup> In this manner, Kane touches on some key positive psychology

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<sup>9</sup> Kane (2007) acknowledges the reasons for medical personnel's failure to send condolence letters, from the fact that physicians are often present at the demise rendering a letter unnecessary, to lack of time, loss of words, feeling they didn't know the deceased well-enough,

constructs, like relationships and mattering. He also suggests that “the doctor’s letter of condolence can serve as a *final act of kindness*” for the recipient (Kane, 2007, p. 1247, emphasis added), interestingly evoking research in positive psychology relating to “random acts of kindness,” which refer to something done for the benefit of an unknown other and generally correlates with increased well-being in the person engaging in the act (Baskerville et al., 2000). While a letter from a physician is not random in that it is not for an unknown other, it does reflect a similar intention of according benefit to another, and it may therefore be worth exploring in regards to a possible correlation with increased well-being for the writer.

While the medical domain is not directly relevant to the study of the impact of condolence letters generally given the unique context of the end-of-life medical environment and the equally unique relationship between medical personnel and the families of the deceased under their care, the mostly positive – and some unexpected – outcomes for the writers invites study of the impact of engaging with this practice in the general population.

### **Sympathy Cards**

Although this capstone is focused on personalized expressions set forth in condolence letters, the development of the sympathy card industry has some bearing on the positive psychology issues addressed herein, from how they standardize expressions of emotion and

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fear of burnout (although there is no support that this would contribute to burnout), death anxiety, and, finally, a sense of failure. Potential liability issues may also be at play, although there is interesting research into the connection between what might be interpreted as physicians’ apologies and subsequent improved outcomes of threatened or actual lawsuits, supported by a growing body of state “apology laws” that encourage apologies by making them inadmissible in court (Ho & Liu, 2010).

empathy, to, more recently, how they have adapted to more modern requirements of context. Some limited research has also been undertaken in this area that merits note.

The most extensive review and research on sympathy cards was undertaken by Marsha McGee (1980) forty years ago, who replicated her study with colleagues eighteen years later (Caldwell, McGee, & Pryor, 1998), and also apparently authored a subsequent blog in the Encyclopedia of Death and Dying on the topic (McGee, n.d.). According to McGee, greeting cards have existed for centuries (the Valentine's card originated in the 1400's and Christmas cards in the 1800's), but the sympathy card only originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The sympathy card enjoys varying levels of popularity in different cultures: for example, while it is relatively common in many Western cultures, particularly in the United States, it is less common in China (notwithstanding the Chinese' marked fondness for other greeting cards, they prefer to convey sympathy via telegram, at least at the time of McGee's initial research) (McGee, 1980).

Much of McGee's research into the contents of sympathy cards of forty and twenty-two years ago holds true today, based on my own quick verification in three retail outlets open and selling sympathy cards (drugstores in New York City) and online ([hallmark.com/sympathy](http://hallmark.com/sympathy) and [papersource.com/greeting-cards/occasions/sympathy](http://papersource.com/greeting-cards/occasions/sympathy)). In 1980 and 1998, and according to what I could observe now, sympathy cards are primarily illustrated with images of flowers (usually suspended on the page, with neither vase nor earth visible), mostly using pastel colors, and never include images of people. In terms of messaging, most cards contain simple texts crafted by teams of writers, many of which containing some version of 'words cannot express' (echoing the same challenge expressed by the writers since the first recorded condolence letters). In terms of vocabulary, the words *death* or *dead* are avoided; at most, the words *loss* or *gone* appear (McGee, 1980). Her follow-up research showed little change, except for a small shift to cards

depicting nature scenes and slightly less formal messages (Caldwell, McGee, & Pryor, 1998).

My own research in stores and online showed that while images of hearts, rainbows, waves, stars and butterflies also now appear in sympathy cards, that of free-standing flowers remains the image of the majority of cards available.

However, recent years have seen the adaptation of sympathy cards to context. There are now specific texts and images reflecting ethnicity, age and religion of the actors involved, and the cause of death, including suicide or cancer, making it easier for the sender to tailor a message to the circumstances, without actually taking pen to hand. The sympathy card industry has also enlarged its offering by creating cards expressing sympathy for other losses, like job loss, divorce, illness, disability, or miscarriage, to say nothing of the huge market for sympathy cards for the loss of pets (McGee, n.d.).

Some research has been conducted with relatively small samples to ascertain views regarding the sending of sympathy cards (McGee, 1980; Lippy, 1983; Caldwell, McGee, & Pryor, 1998). McGee's 1980 and 1998 studies were limited to college students with the addition, in the second replicated study, of an older group participating in a seminar on death and dying. The sample in the 1983 study was a group of randomly chosen people in Clemson, South Carolina (Lippy, 1983).

While some students in the samples queried whether a sympathy card would even be appreciated by the recipient (McGee, 1980), the results generally showed (with an increase in the later study) that the participants felt that the cards would show the recipient that someone cared (Caldwell, McGee, & Pryor, 1998; McGee, 1980). In the 1983 study, the participants generally considered that while a letter would be preferable, some expression of concern set forth in a sympathy card is better than none, as it provides meaning to both the writer and the recipient,

and increases social bonds (Lippy, 1983). The weakness of these studies, in addition to being dated, is that they were based on purely hypothetical questions posed to limited samples of participants, most of whom had not actually experienced loss, or sent or received either sympathy cards or condolence letters.

Sympathy cards have received unexpected attention in Covid-19 times, as can be seen from the full front-page article of the Business Section of *The New York Times* in May of this year reporting that sympathy cards were “flying off the shelves,” with retail stores reporting a shortage resulting from the combination of increased deaths and the impossibility of attending a funeral or other in-person gathering to express sympathy (Corkery & Maheshwari, 2020). Interestingly, there is no reference in the article to the possibility of writing a letter instead.

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As can be seen from the foregoing, the research into the impact of condolence letters generally is scant, although some of the research into the medical arena contains findings that resonate from a positive psychology perspective, like the positive impact to the writer, the strengthening of social bonds, and the opportunity to engage in (not so random) acts of kindness, and, from a sympathy card perspective, the opportunity to express meaning and enhance social bonds.

#### **(IV) Connections to Positive Psychology**

Three main conclusions can be drawn concerning the connections between condolence letters and positive psychology from the development of positive psychology analyzed in **Section I**, the practice of writing condolence letters throughout modern history illustrated in **Section II**, and what little research exists in the area set forth in **Section III**.



*First*, in addition to the positive outcomes of expressive writing generally, many of the mechanisms urged by scholars of positive psychology for well-being are precisely those mechanisms that form part of the exercise of writing a condolence letter, as can be mapped from the elements of a positive psychology intervention and which give rise to yet further unique and unexpected positive outcomes.

*Second*, the opportunity to generate a broad variety of positive outcomes that have the potential to generate well-being from a starting point of negative emotions, confirms the place of the negative in the positive, bearing out the dialectical approach to positive psychology advocated by many scholars. This previously unexplored example of the bittersweet in action has real potential to enrich the science of positive psychology.

*Third*, the combination of the two foregoing conclusions, together with the absence of any truly relevant research and the particular challenges of Covid-19, calls for further study. The time is now more than ripe to investigate the impact of engaging in the practice of writing condolence letters on well-being.

These three conclusions are developed below.

### **Writing a Condolence Letter as a Positive Psychology Intervention**

The starting point for analyzing the connection between condolence letters and positive psychology is to consider whether engaging in the act of writing a condolence letter might constitute a positive psychology intervention leading to increased well-being. To make this determination, one has to first define what constitutes a positive psychology intervention, and then determine whether writing a condolence letter has the potential to meet that definition.

**Positive psychology interventions.** Many scholars of positive psychology have weighed in on the sub-field of the application of positive psychology, referred to today as positive interventions or positive psychology interventions. Positive psychology interventions were not addressed in Seligman's early articulation of positive psychology, but, a few years later, Seligman, Steen, Park, & and Peterson (2005) defined the term positive interventions as the "evidence-based practice of positive psychology" (p. 410) and "psychological interventions to increase individual happiness" (p. 413). Sin & Lyubomirsky (2009) expanded on this definition by referring to "treatment methods or intentional activities aimed at cultivating positive feelings, behaviors or cognitions" (p. 468).<sup>10</sup>

Having reviewed many scholarly articles on positive psychology interventions, I would suggest that a more detailed definition providing a greater scope of possible elements for the purpose of analyzing positive psychology perspectives on condolence letters could be: *an evidence-based practice of engaging in intentional activities, through the use of emotions and feelings, mindfulness, and/or focus on character strengths and virtues, that encourages agency or autonomy, creates meaning or builds relationships, with the goal of increasing well-being.* I

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<sup>10</sup> These definitions reflect a certain orientation towards clinical treatment that was often associated with interventions, subsequently watered down by the editors of the *Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Positive Psychological Interventions*, who simply refer, in the preface, to interventions "aimed to increase happiness" (Parks & Schueller, 2014, p. xv). A more precise approach was adopted by Pawelski (personal communication, October 17, 2019), who advances alternative definitions from what he calls a *contextual* perspective and a *methodological* perspective. Thus, according to his detailed analysis, from a contextual perspective, positive interventions are "an evidence-based, intentional act designed to increase well-being in non-clinical populations", adding, for a methodological perspective "while enhancing that which increases well-being". In this manner, Pawelski seems to lift the practice of positive interventions out of the grip of the clinicians and into the larger (non-clinical) population. This being said, by retaining the "evidence-based" qualifier of Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005), he tips the scales in favor of science, lest there be any doubt.

will address each element of this definition in turn below, culling from the research or examples from the historical letters reviewed above. I will turn to the “evidence-based” element last.

**Intentional act.** Sitting down to write a letter is an intentional action, engaged in with attention and by choice. One writer calls it “a product whose labor is intentionally visible” (Austerlitz, 2014). Even with the availability of digital means of communication, the whole exercise of putting pen to paper (or, if writing on a computer, typing, formatting and printing a letter), locating envelopes and stamps, ensuring one has the right address, and then posting the letter (or sending the letter by email), requires deliberate action.<sup>11</sup>

The condolence letter may moreover require more conscious attention than many forms of expressive writing, given the challenges in finding the right words attested to by the majority of the writers in the historical examples cited above (Seneca’s need for a “novel vocabulary” since grief “stifles the voice itself”, Lincoln’s feeling that his words were “weak and fruitless”, and McArthur’s “utter futility of words”, to mention a few). Even if one finds the words, the task is daunting. Austerlitz (2014) described the challenge in these evocative words: “How do you summarize a life? A friendship? What words can do justice to the entirety of the person?” (p. 2).

Moreover, many of the expressive writing interventions mentioned in **Section I** were exercises were generally focused on the writer themselves (e.g., disclosing traumatic events that happened to them, or setting their personal goals). The task of writing a condolence letter requires all the more intentionality in that it is a writing directed to another person. And, as

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<sup>11</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has attracted more attention to the positive benefits of letter-writing generally, as several recent articles in *The New York Times* have indicated: “Mourning the Letters That Will No Longer Be Written, and Remembering the Great Ones That Were” (Garner, 2020); “Snail Mail is Getting People Through This Time” and “You Should Start Writing Letters” (Salama, 2020a and 2020b).

illustrated in the historical examples in **Section II**, the contents can call on the writer to derive a wide variety of constructs from loss, from making meaning, to recalling character strengths, to inspiring hope or reflections on legacy. With the increasing stakes of a second pair of eyes and challenging content, the exercise requires all the more intentionality.

**Use of emotions or feelings.** The primary purpose of writing a condolence letter is to convey feelings of shared sorrow and solace. The emotions expressed can be negative (grief, sadness and even anger), but also positive (love, hope and even in some cases, an emotion approaching growth, transformation or transcendence), with the result that engaging in the act of writing a condolence letter has the potential to give rise to the positive emotions that form the “P” in Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model. But in all events, emotions and feelings are undeniably present in the exercise.

**Mindfulness.** Writing a condolence letter is also an exercise in mindfulness, bringing attention or awareness to the present moment without judgment (*Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 2005). Like virtually all positive psychology interventions, writing a condolence letter requires the writer to pause, focus, and be deeply present. As the action of expressive writing is in and of itself an act of attention, this is necessarily even more the case with the writing of a condolence letter, where the writer has to address the trauma of loss, exercise practical wisdom to tailor their responses, and seek to find some positive out of the negative (like making meaning or solidifying social bonds). As for the criteria of being without judgment, the writer’s intent can be presumed to be judgment-free; except perhaps in very particular circumstances, judgement is not the goal of the condolence letter. Accordingly, the factor of mindfulness is also present.

**Character strengths and virtues.** Condolence letters are often focused on character strengths or virtues, particularly as illustrated in the historical examples of the past two centuries, be they the “noble” qualities of the Civil War soldiers, the “light and happiness” of Virginia Woolf, or the “greatness” of President Kennedy. Indeed, every condolence letter represents an opportunity for the writer to identify character strengths or virtues of the deceased and/or the recipient, and measure the impact of those traits.

Character strengths may also be a springboard for consoling the recipient, like counseling gratitude for the deceased’s traits or encouraging generativity in the passing forward of such traits. Engaging thoughtfully in this exercise could also spark reflections on the writer’s *own* strengths. This could, in turn, initiate the phenomenon supported by research indicating that people who access their “true self” predict an increased sense of meaning in life (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009).

Therefore, identifying character strengths or virtues can be an important part of the exercise of writing thoughtful condolence letters.

**Agency and autonomy.** From a positive psychology perspective, agency is the human capacity to believe in the ability to assess and control one’s future (Bandura, 1989), and autonomy is regulation of the self (Ryan & Deci, 2006). The writer of a condolence letter may try to offer solace by urging the recipient to turn their attention to other pursuits or find meaning in the loss, and in this manner encourage the recipient to assert some control over their grief and regulate their sorrow.<sup>12</sup> Many of the writers of the historical letters cited in **Section II** did precisely this by advocating action, philosophy, spiritual beliefs, liberal studies, writing, or

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<sup>12</sup> There is research indicating that participating in personal rituals can give those dealing with grief a sense of control, decreasing feelings of helplessness and grief (Norton & Gino, 2014; Smith, 2014), as compellingly recounted in Joan Didion’s (2005) memoir.

simply the belief in the healing power of the passage of time to deal with their grief. Moreover, by expressing themselves on an uncomfortable topic and/or by seeking to generate a positive emotion from a negative experience, the writer fosters their *own* sense of agency and autonomy by endeavoring to exercise control over a situation that is, unfortunately but unquestionably, beyond control (death). In this manner, agency and autonomy also find their place in the act of writing a condolence letter.

**Meaning.** Many of the historical condolence letters reflect the writer's desire to create meaning from the life or death of the deceased, both for the writer and the recipient. Seligman (2011) defines the meaningful life as "belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self" (p. 12). Meaning in this sense can be derived from service to a greater cause, as illustrated in the letters regarding the deaths of soldiers; it can be manifested in a legacy of leadership, as the letters concerning the assassination of President Kennedy articulate, or a legacy of creative genius as was the case for many of the letters concerning the death of Virginia Woolf; and it can emerge from the love of land and tradition in Seward's letter regarding the death of James Dean. Meaning can also emerge from the study of philosophy urged in the *consolatio*s of Cicero and Seneca and the letters of Voltaire, as it can from the spiritual conviction about togetherness in an afterlife expressed by Franklin and Jefferson.<sup>13</sup>

In this manner, not only is the element of meaning in my proposed definition of positive psychology interventions very much present, but the element of meaning represented by the "M" of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model is as well.

**Relationships.** Writing a condolence letter is also an opportunity to enhance social bonds or relationships. First, the condolence letter constitutes at its core a manifestation of

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<sup>13</sup> I propose some more accessible means of encouraging generative meaning in the **Appendix**.

sympathy between two or more individuals, an element of human connection that acts as an essential social glue, bonding people together particularly in challenging times (McGee, n.d.).<sup>14</sup>

However, the impact of writing a condolence letter goes beyond contributing to social bonds by expressions of sympathy. It can also impact how people will relate to each other in the future. A condolence letter can increase closeness, underscore, deepen and strengthen friendships, and even produce emotional energy that people store and carry with them as a resource for later, as one person interviewed for this capstone told me. Several people reported that they kept certain condolence letters they had received, often from years earlier, in an easily accessible place, as inspiration and/or as a reminder of relationships. The impact on relationships may also extend beyond the writer and recipient to family members, friends and community, as was the case, for example, in many of the Civil War letters which were published in the local press of the hometowns of the fallen soldiers (Dunkelman, n.d.). Another person I interviewed told me how letters she received upon her mother's death gave her what she called "unique glimpses into the lives of her parents", insights that she was then able to pass on to others in her family.

Developing relationships is therefore also a key aspect of condolence letters.

Accordingly, with the exception of the 'evidence-based' requirement which I will address below, all of the elements of positive psychology interventions in the definition I propose are potentially present in the act of writing a condolence letter.

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<sup>14</sup> As McGee notes:

Sympathy is functional for society, however, because it provides a social connection among people; without it, life's emotional climate becomes colder and harsher...

Through expressions of sympathy, people can be linked in ways that affect the social interaction of families, work forces, and entire communities, as well as the individuals involved. (McGee, n.d.)

However, there is more. The writing of a condolence letter also requires the exercise of other mechanisms that are deeply connected to positive psychology and the dialectical nature of the balance of positive and negative in positive psychology, in particular, practical wisdom and resilience. They also give rise to mechanisms generating other positive outcomes, as briefly developed below.

**Practical wisdom.** As many of the historical examples illustrated, writing condolence letters requires the writer to engage in the ultimate practice of Aristotelian master virtue of practical wisdom, given the particularly critical need to carefully consider context when putting pen to paper to craft the appropriate condolence message. Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) highlight the need to address the three issues that must be part of the exercise of practical wisdom, namely those of (i) specificity, (ii) relevance and (iii) conflict that inevitably arise when an individual's character strengths must be translated into action. For these authors, addressing these issues with practical wisdom will be essential for relationships with friends, lovers and family to thrive.

This is particularly so in the concrete case of expressing sorrow for loss. Identifying (i) the specific need of a particular friend or acquaintance and determining (ii) what would be relevant to the circumstance in terms of expressing shared sorrow, or offering comfort, are clearly called for. The need (iii) to avoid conflict by choosing the right words and stories to share about a deceased one knew, or didn't know – or perhaps didn't even like! – also forces context to the forefront in the exercise of writing a condolence letter. From the perspective of Schwartz and Sharpe's (2006) three issues, every thoughtful condolence letter really should be an exercise of practical wisdom, in addition to all of the elements of positive psychology interventions identified above.



**Resilience.** As indicated in **Section I**, the construct of resilience has become another essential focal points in the application of positive psychology in the past 15 years, like the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Resilience Program (Reivich & Gillham, 2010), the U.S. Army Master Resilience Trainer (MRT) course that is part of the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program based on the Penn program (Reivich, Seligman & McBride, 2011), and educational programs like CorStone's Girls First program in India (Leventhal, DeMaria, Gillham, Andrew, Peabody, & Leventhal, 2016); and others (Gillham, Abenavoli, Brunwasser, Linkins, Reivich, & Seligman, 2013). Resilience scholars have noted how resilience not only permits overcoming adversity, it can give rise to other positive outcomes, like greater connection with others and seizing of opportunities (Reivich & Shatté, 2002; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Against this background, resilience offers an obvious framework for condolence letters. What, after all, are the writers of most condolence letters seeking to achieve in their consolations? By urging some form of bouncing back after a severe obstacle or coping with adversity, they are urging resilience. By advocating patience, the passage of time, faith, and even distractions like liberal studies or mechanical tasks, they are advocating tools to pass through and beyond the devastation of grief. By suggesting the pursuit of spiritual beliefs or proposing other forms of generativity, they are recommending not just overcoming adversity, but ways of finding greater connections with others or seizing other opportunities, precisely the other positive outcomes proposed by Reivich and Shatté (2002).

**Other potential positive outcomes.** The exchange of emotions between the writer and recipient of a condolence letter can have a multiplying effect, potentially sparking a further separate series of positive emotions and outcomes. For example, the writer can express the emotion of sympathy and the recipient can receive that emotion, but the exchange can then

evolve into the emotion of love, or the strengthening of the social bond between the writer and the recipient (or even between the writer's family and the recipient's family). Similarly, the writer's words may evoke the character strengths or the lasting positive impact of the deceased, which in turn can potentially elicit meaning making or altruism in the recipient. The writer's story-telling about the deceased might also constitute a redemptive sequence and contribute to generativity in both the writer and the recipient. As evoked by the work of the scholars cited in **Section I** who study some of the impacts of grief, Vallant (2008), Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014), Feudtner (2009), Hill et al. (2014) and Nolen-Hoeksema and Davis (2005), other positive outcomes that could emerge from this unique opportunity to acknowledge and explore the bittersweet might include calling attention to the needs of others, averting further loss, offering perspective, increasing connectedness, or reconfiguring loss by creating new hopes or goals.

In short, there is a wide range of possible results from the unique alchemy of emotions expressed in a condolence letter that make studying its impact all the more necessary, in order to meet the last criteria of the definition of positive psychology interventions, namely that they be evidence-based as discussed in the last section of this capstone.

### **The Condolence Letter Supports the Presence of the Bittersweet in Positive Psychology**

Just as it has been demonstrated above that engaging in the act of writing a condolence letter has the potential to constitute a positive psychology intervention, so, conversely, can it be shown that the condolence letter supports the coexistence of the negative with the positive, and is relevant to the well-being that can emerge as a result of this coexistence.

By acknowledging and indeed embracing the opportunities for increasing well-being in the bittersweet, the field of positive psychology would undeniably be enhanced. Death is the bitterest and most inevitable of events, an event which every human will at some point have to

deal with, as well as the resulting sorrowful emotions triggered by that loss. There is no life experience that can avoid this.<sup>15</sup> Even the most fortunate of humans who have access to the activities that promote well-being, who can score highly on every element of Diener and Chan's (2011) subjective well-being test, check every one of Seligman's (2011) PERMA factors, or who have found the keys to developing practical wisdom and resilience, will at some point have to deal with the loss of someone to death, and the negative emotions that ensue. There will therefore inevitably be negative even in lives filled with the most well-being.

For more than 2000 years, people have faced the inevitability of these negative events by engaging in the highly intentional activity of writing condolence letters to try find some sweetness to alleviate this bitterness for the recipient, and often for themselves. To the extent that engaging in this activity has the potential to give rise to many of the elements of a positive psychology intervention, and more positive outcomes as demonstrated above, the question becomes what, if any, are the effects of this intervention on well-being?

Writing a condolence letter clearly cannot reverse the loss or eradicate the source of the sorrow. But writing the condolence letter itself can serve as its own manifestation of the dialectical opposites of the negative and the positive, of sorrow and love or of despair and hope. Moreover, although the empirical support is lacking for now, the hope would be that engaging in the activity of writing a condolence letter has the capacity to move the needle, even if only slightly, in a positive direction, for the writer at the very least, and perhaps for the recipient too. By creating even small amounts of positive emotion, by encouraging some modicum of the

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<sup>15</sup> This being said, some writers of the historical letters analyzed in **Section II** note that a child's death means that they will not have to deal with such sorrows (in one of the papyri, the writer wrote: "The girl is fortunate in having found refuge from the unhappy and toilsome life before its disaster arrived" (Rea, 1986, p. 76), and, in Darwin's letter to his wife quoted above, he wrote "God only knows what miseries might have been in store for her.")

positive constructs of action, faith or hope, by striving to enhance relationships, make meaning and generate growth or positive legacies even to a modest degree, the net effect to the two actors must be positive.

This then serves as perhaps the ultimate support for positive psychology operating in the dialectical sphere as urged by various 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars in **Section I**. Positive psychology's promise of happiness is seductive, but the science will be weakened if does not address and embrace ways to address life's inevitable negatives, the most extreme of which being death. To the extent that life inevitably and inexorably contains negative events, believing in the possibility of improving them, even if only slightly, has to be one of positive psychology's greatest gifts. Acknowledging this by investing in further study of the impact of this practice will enrich the science of positive psychology and deepen its impact. In the process, it will help humans address the complexities of life and, I believe, come closer to experiencing what makes life most worth living (Peterson, 2006).

### **Research into the Impact of Writing Condolence Letters is Necessary and Timely**

As set forth in **Section III**, the only scientific research that has explored the effect of condolence letters has been in the narrow field of the medical arena, primarily focused on the impact on the recipient – the family members of deceased patients, often pediatric patients. Although there are some peripherally interesting results from that research on the impact on the writer's well-being (a sense of closure or a means of addressing the writer's own grief), the circumstances are overly specific to the medical arena to provide the kind of insight that more generalized research might uncover. Similarly, the limited research on sympathy cards is dated and may have relied on data from a particularly unrepresentative sample (college students and

others with little experience of loss), and did not involve any consideration of the impact of actually writing a condolence letter.

Given the potential overlap between the positive outcomes that appear to be present in the act of engaging in writing condolence letters demonstrated herein, both from a historical overview and an analysis of the various elements of positive psychology interventions, and given the potential for increasing the depth and breadth of the role of the bittersweet in the science of positive psychology, what is clearly missing is the “evidence-based” element of the definition of positive psychology interventions, namely empirical support.

Such empirical support would be of particular value today. As the exposure of so many all over the world to death as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, with, as of this writing, no clear end in sight, investigating the impact of how people cope with death and exploring opportunities for positive outcomes notwithstanding is all the more urgent.

Sadly, the present circumstances may lend themselves to undertaking randomized control studies in this area. For example, participants in educational settings, both with school children and university students, be will be more likely to be grappling with the death of someone known to them than might have been the case prior to Covid-19. One could imagine designing condolence letter writing interventions with some classes, and assigning other neutral writing assignments to others as control groups. Making the intervention a regular practice over a period of time (for example, over a semester), as opposed to a one-time exercise, could give more opportunity to test the depth and duration of the impact of the intervention. This would avoid some of the limitation in impact over time of the gratitude letter demonstrated by the research in that area (Seligman, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Circumstances permitting

a longitudinal study that explored possible outcomes over time and in non-Western cultures might also be available.

Thoughtfully crafted interventions of this kind could invite the participants to engage in writing condolences for deaths of people they knew (or recipients they knew who lost someone they did not know), and/or people they don't know (public figures), with prompts as to what they might include in the letters (such as a focus on character strengths, meaning or legacy). Their well-being could be measured from both a more immediate mood perspective using the Positive Affect and Negative Affect (PANAS) Scale (Watson, Clarke, & Tellegen, 1998), and a broader well-being scale, like the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) (Pavot & Diener, 2008), both measured against the results of the control group. Undoubtedly there are many other means of obtaining valuable empirical data to test my hypothesis that creative researchers could envisage.

Moreover, what could be seen as ethical challenges to undertaking research surrounding death could be outweighed by interest in tools for addressing the impact of the pandemic on mental health. There is a strong indication from the popular press that in these challenging pandemic times, people are interested in positive psychology's offerings for weathering the pandemic, from maintaining optimism to enhancing relationships and fostering resilience. As indicated in footnote 11 above, letter writing in general has been seen as a source of some relief given the requirements of quarantining and screen fatigue, and interest in how to express bereavement has also generated interest (Corkery & Maheshwani, 2020; Rosman, 2020). Accordingly, the time is ripe for further study from a social and cultural perspective as well.

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It is hoped that pulling together the various strands in this capstone will make a compelling case for this research to be undertaken.

### Conclusions

Out of loss and sorrow, the act of writing a condolence letter focuses *attention*, prescribes *action* and requires the exercise of *practical wisdom* to reflect *context*, the historical cornerstones of positive psychology. This act shows promise for generating some of the well-being and relationship benefits of engaging in expressive writing, like its cousin, the gratitude letter. This act also endeavors to create meaning out of the inexplicable. It highlights and recalls character strengths. It provides an opportunity for reflection, growth, learning and legacy. It offers comfort and hope and perhaps transcendence. It makes people feel they matter. It advocates tools of resilience in times of adversity. It contributes to the social glue of communities.

There is thus ample reason to consider that the act of writing a condolence letter should fit squarely into the framework of positive psychology interventions, and, conversely, that the dialectic of the positive-negative bittersweet balance advocated by many 21<sup>st</sup> century positive psychology scholars is supported by the exercise and impact of writing a condolence letter.

Notwithstanding, there is no empirical research supporting these findings; what little there is has only a narrow application to a medical environment. Filling this gap may provide an opportunity for survivors to emerge from the storm of Covid-19, and other losses to come, with some positive outcomes, and to deepen the study of positive psychology generally.

In short, there are many reasons to urge both adoption of the practice of writing condolence letters and undertaking research into its impact, particularly in times when death's shadow is upon us all, and when words matter most.

## Appendix

### **Recommendations on Writing a Condolence Letter**

As demonstrated in my capstone, viewed from the perspective of positive psychology, the act of writing a thoughtful condolence letter has the potential to generate outcomes for the writer that have a positive correlation with well-being, including positive emotions, meaning, enhanced relationships, and more. The purpose of this appendix is to provide some practical guidance as to how to write a condolence letter with these outcomes in mind.

The recommendations below are based on the research undertaken for my capstone, examples from impactful historical letters, interviews with people touched by this practice, and my reflections on what is appropriate in today's challenging times.

The golden rule of writing a condolence letter is that context is paramount. The recommendations that follow should be undertaken with the master virtue of "practical wisdom" advocated by Aristotle, one of the founding grandfathers of positive psychology, that calls for virtues to be prioritized and actions to be driven by context. This means that the specific circumstances of the death and the relationships among the writer, the recipient and the deceased, will direct the form and content of the letter.

#### **Form**

**Letter or sympathy card?** A condolence letter is a letter. That means that it should be a separate written missive that starts with a "Dear (recipient)", that contains a personal message from the writer to the recipient, and that ends with an appropriate closing salutation (more on this below). This does not mean that a condolence message can't be written on a card. One person interviewed said that they regularly use blank cards with images that recall something about the



deceased. But a condolence letter is not a store-bought sympathy card with a printed message, no matter how tempting that commercial short-cut may seem.<sup>16</sup>

**Handwritten or typed?** Both serve a purpose. Undoubtedly the more traditional choice is a handwritten letter, which can be seen as a demonstration to the recipient of the writer's implication, suggesting that it took more time and is more personalized.<sup>17</sup> This being said, the writer may believe that their ability to articulate more complex reflections will be better served by typing a letter, as those of us who regularly use word-processing to craft our best writing might conclude. Several people indicated that they might draft the letter digitally, and then recopy the finalized text by hand. Finally, if the writer's handwriting would be difficult to decipher, a typed missive might be a blessing for the recipient.

**Stamp and post or press 'send'?** The efforts involved in sending a letter by mail create a more personal touch, indicating care on the part of the writer. A letter won't get lost in the inbox, and it allows the recipient to decide when and where to read it (not at their computer, for example). It also creates a personal artifact that can be savored and retained as a keepsake more easily than an email.

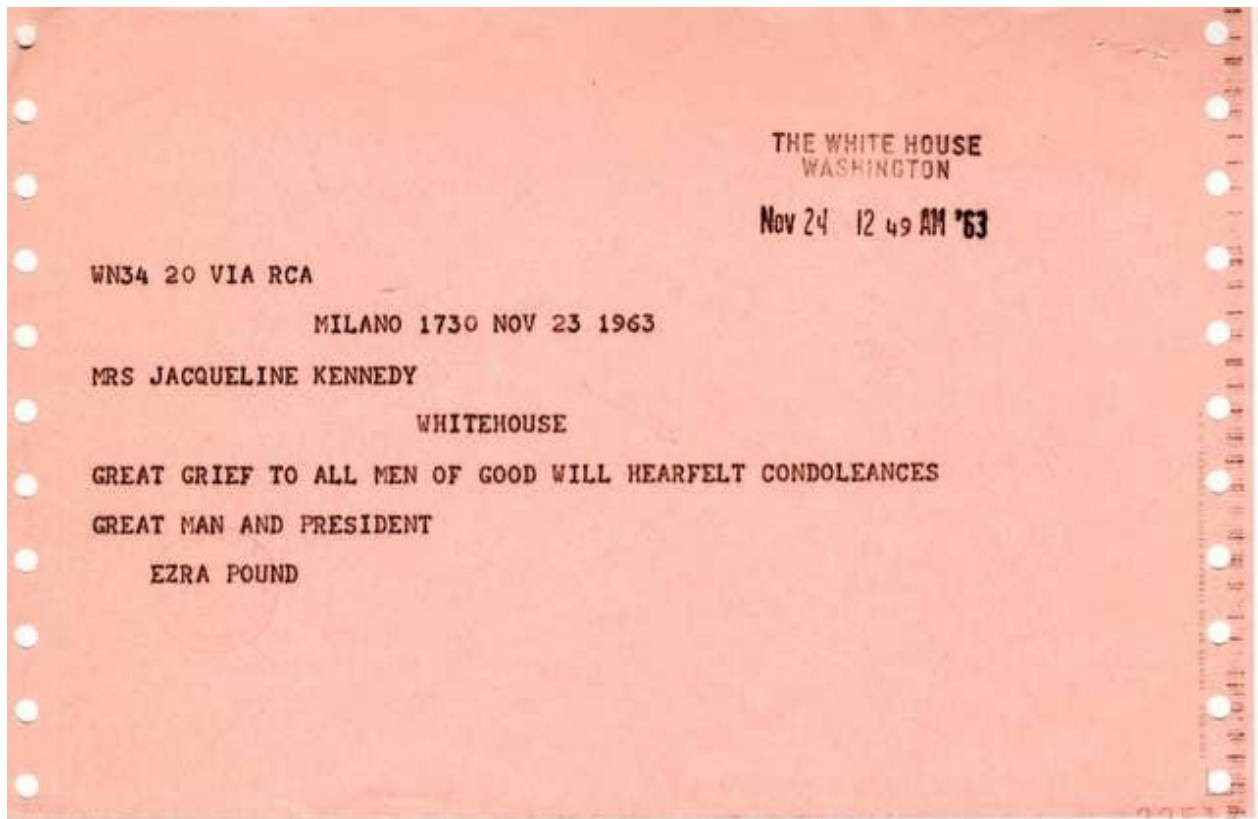
This being said, sending a letter by email (or even in the text of an email), can be acceptable if it does not give the impression of a message dashed off in a few seconds. If sending condolences electronically, the content may need to make up for the means of

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<sup>16</sup> Store-bought sympathy cards may be appropriate if the relationship between the writer and the recipient and/or the deceased is so distant that it truly calls for no personal message. A sympathy card may also be an appropriate means of sending condolences from a group. Digital cards that permit grouped signatures might also be appropriate if gathering to sign a card is impossible.

<sup>17</sup> There is interesting research indicating that writing by hand, which requires a series of complex movements, is more effective for enhancing memory for the writer than typing, which requires only repetitive movements (Smoker, Murphy, & Rockwell, 2009), suggesting that there may be an higher level of personal engagement generally for the writer who puts pen to paper.

transmission. One could argue that there is nothing so new about sending digital condolences: many of the missives of the last century were sent via Western Union, and their remnants today, in faded yellow or pink paper, with messages in all caps and limited, if any, punctuation, reflect the urgency and expense that this means of communication represented. A good example of this is the message from the poet Ezra Pound to Jacqueline Kennedy the day after her husband was assassinated; its brevity was compensated by its immediacy and content:



Another way in which using email may be appropriate is if it is to serve as a prompt reaction to the news, which might then be followed up by a longer, more thoughtful communication. In that instance, the email (or even a text message or other form of digital communication regularly used by the writer and recipient – I confess to having responded to a friend’s Instagram post announcing her father’s death before writing a letter a few days later) is

appropriate if and only if a longer communication follows. Email may also be appropriate when this is the sole mode of communication between writer and recipient, especially if the writer does not have the physical address of the recipient. Finally, I do not believe that social media is the right place to express condolences, unless there is a designated space for such messages that invites public posting, and in most cases if it is followed up by a more personal message. A good rule of thumb is that the method of communication should not be perceived as perfunctory.

**Length: short or long?** A condolence letter does not need to be long, but, again, let context be the guide. A note penned upon receiving the news of a death whose main purpose is to express immediate shared sorrow need not be lengthy, like Ezra Pound's telegram cited earlier. Brevity can also be impactful, even when not immediate, as was the message a childhood friend upon the death of our father that said simply: "He was the father we all wished we had." However, timing (a letter penned weeks after the death), and/or the circumstances of the relationship between the writer and the recipient (and/or the deceased), may call for more length to demonstrate the writer's concern and attention. Voltaire claimed that his motto was "Short letters, long friendships," but he was quite prolific in his condolence letters, and the letters I examined over two thousand years of history ranged from most of a full page to thirty or forty pages. I generally aim for at least one handwritten page.

**Timing: now or later?** Some would say that it is necessary to write as soon as one hears the news, to acknowledge the information and convey shared sorrow to the recipient immediately. T.S. Eliot wrote to the husband of Virginia Woolf the day after hearing of her suicide: "I merely feel quite numb at the moment, and can't think about this or anything else, but I want you to know that you are as constantly in my mind as in anyone's." Others hesitate at

intruding on immediate grief, as Seneca wrote in his consolation to his mother, Helvia, on the death of his own son (and his own exile):

I realized that your grief should not be intruded upon while it was fresh and agonizing, in case the consolations themselves should rouse and inflame it. . . . So I was waiting until your grief of itself should lose its force and, being softened by time to endure remedies, it would allow itself to be touched and handled.

The people I interviewed who had suffered loss reflected this range of positions. Some appreciated the expressions of concern that arrived in the days after the death, which helped them bear some of the immediate pain. Others said that early letters could not really be digested at a time when the shock was still immediate and the funeral and logistical arrangements were front of mind. Another person who had suffered their share of loss said that they regularly waited at least two weeks until sending a condolence letter to respect those early days.

Longer term, there is also the practice of writing on the anniversary of the death, to show that you remember and you care (Wollan, 2018). Marking the calendar for the coming year with these anniversaries can serve as a reminder to reach out.

My own position is that if you feel you should write a condolence letter, write one, no matter when that is. Using practical wisdom, your words will reflect the emotions and circumstances of the time that you write. If you feel the tug of regret of not having written a condolence letter, sometimes even months or years later, as several people I interviewed confessed (and has happened to me too), it is never too late. Write the letter (and see below how you might start it). It may end up standing out favorably by virtue of its lateness.

One last idea about timing that more than one person shared with me is the possibility of writing a letter to someone who is facing death. This is obviously not a true condolence letter,

but can be an opportunity for both the writer and the recipient to share emotion, find meaning, deepen a social bond and perhaps find solace at this critical time.

## Content

**Finding the right words.** Throughout modern history, even the most skilled writers struggle with what words to use, reflecting both the challenge of finding the right words and the feeling that words are not enough to offer comfort:

- Seneca wrote about the need for a “novel vocabulary” and how “every great and overpowering grief must take away the capacity to choose words, since it often stifles the voice itself.”
- Voltaire mentioned the “impossibility of calming such a violent passion as grief through words alone.”
- Lincoln wrote that he felt “how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming.”
- Edith Sitwell stated (on the death of Virginia Woolf) that “no words can express our feelings at this dreadful heartrending thing.”
- General McArthur wrote (to Jacqueline Kennedy) of the “utter futility of words at such a time.”<sup>18</sup>

There is nothing new to this perceived obstacle; it is universal and simply has to be overcome.

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<sup>18</sup> This struggle is also indicative of some of the opposing forces at play in the exercise. One scholar points to the irony in these writers using language to say that there is no appropriate language (Lippy, 1983). Another scholar suggests, that this struggle is a paradox: if the writer has no words, perhaps silence expresses the ultimate shared sorrow (Carr, 1996). While this is an interesting point of view, I would not suggest following this recommendation!

The hardest part can be just getting started. If this is the case, simplicity could be the best approach. A standard beginning as simple as: “I was so very sorry/saddened to learn of the loss of your ----” or “Ever since I heard about your ----, I have been struggling to find the words to express how sorry I was” may suffice.

If you feel that your letter is late, you might begin with the acknowledgment that “I am sorry I have not written earlier, but I have not stopped thinking about your ---- these past weeks/months and wanted to tell you how sorry I was.” In this manner, the tardiness is addressed from the outset, and there is no need to mention it again in the letter. If an anniversary of the death is coming up (or the deceased’s birthday or another meaningful date), that might also provide a timing springboard: “With this anniversary coming up, I wanted to reach out to you to tell you how deeply saddened I have felt by the loss of ---- this past year.”

**Tone.** Tone is very much part of the practical wisdom exercise of writing a condolence letter, as the writer’s choice of words will evoke different levels of intensity of emotion. Wording need not be vague; on the contrary, as one writer advised (Rosnan, 2020), be direct and be specific. For example, while the sympathy card industry avoids using the word “death” and prefers the more generic “loss” or “passing” (McGee, 1980), there is no need to use words that feel unnatural, such as “demise,” or dance around the issue that the deceased has, in fact, died. Sadly, that is the very reason for the communication. General MacArthur’s telegram to Jacqueline Kennedy did not shy away from using the “D” word: “As a former comrade in arms, his death kills something within me,” nor did Lincoln, writing to the daughter of a friend who died: “It is with deep grief that I learn of the death of your kind and brave Father.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly, it is acceptable to acknowledge particular circumstances, for example where the death was expected following a long difficult illness, or may even have come as a relief, in which case, you can include something like “I know how hard these past years have been on all

Do not hesitate to keep vocabulary simple. A condolence letter is not a writing competition. As my review of condolence letters over history indicates, sometimes it is the combination of simple words or their repetition that makes the most impact. Here are some examples of evocative combinations of relatively simple words:

- Civil War soldier Nathaniel S. Brown began his letter with “It is with trembling hand and an aching heart that I address you with a silent pen”
- Lincoln’s letter to parents on the loss of their son referred to “your brave and early fallen child”
- Einstein’s consoled his sister on the death of her husband by reminding her of the pleasures remaining in life, that “Mozart remains as beautiful and tender as he always was and always will be.”

Repetition of a particular word also lends force to the condolence letter, as these examples show:

- Civil War letter written by W.H.D. Carrington about his fellow-soldier: “his brave and noble bearing [...] the noblest among the noble minded”
- Charles Darwin’s letter to his wife upon the death of their eldest daughter (of ten children) refers to “our poor dear dear child,” and closes with this same touching repetition: “My own poor dear dear wife”
- Ezra Pound’s repeated use of the word “great” in his telegram to Jacqueline Kennedy reproduced above, echoed in Duke Ellington’s telegram which closes with “great loss of your great man;” and

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of you.” Recognizing the additional heartbreak of not being able to say good-bye due to Covid-19 or other intervening circumstances may also be appropriate.

- Thomas Jefferson’s letter to John Adams on the death of his wife: “the friends we have loved and lost and whom we shall still love and never lose again.”

**Expressing emotion.** Condolence letters usually have at least two broader purposes. The first purpose is for the writer to express shared pain with the recipient, as the etymological root of the word condolence suggests, namely togetherness (*com*) in pain (*doleo*). At its most basic, the letter expresses sadness for the sadness of the recipient. Accordingly, if the first sentence has not expressed this shared pain, the writer’s emotion should be acknowledged in first lines. A brief condolence letter that is focused only on that message (typically one written immediately upon receipt of the news of the death), might suffice in some circumstances, particularly if the link between writer and bereaved is weak. In such case, a relatively simple condolence text, based on some form of “I am sorry for your loss,” might be enough.<sup>20</sup> But do not hesitate to express genuinely felt emotion with more specifics. Earlier condolence letters in history indicate that doing so might be perceived as “unmanly” (Seneca was specifically warned by his friend Serpicius to maintain his “noble dignity” as he grieved for his daughter Tullia), but this concern has faded with the centuries. Voltaire did not hesitate to write extensively of his own tears wetting the paper on which he wrote (Carr, 1996), and many of the writers of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries expressed deep emotion. A condolence letter without emotion will have much less impact.

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<sup>20</sup> This being said, these particular words may have become something of a cliché (like “thoughts and prayers” on the occasion of mass shootings). Sheryl Sandberg reports an example of someone shouting “sorry for your loss” to Diane Sawyer on an escalator going in the opposite direction, which is clearly not ideal (Sandberg & Grant, 2017).



The second purpose is for the condolence letter to act as a consolation (from its etymological roots of togetherness (*com*) in solace (*solari*). Consolation will generally require more thoughtful wording that might include one or more of the topics or approaches below.

**Familiarity with loss.** Drawing on one's own experience with loss, or lack thereof, may come into play here. In the former case, sharing your own similar experience with words like "I lost my own father five years ago, and so can imagine the pain you must be going through," might be comforting. Sheryl Sandberg found condolences from others who had suffered unforeseen tragic loss particularly helpful after the sudden death of her husband (Sandberg & Grant, 2017). When you have no similar experience of the kind of loss in question, it is acceptable to acknowledge your lack of familiarity, with language like "I cannot (begin to) imagine what you must be going through, except that it must be a very painful time."

Consoling by sharing personal experience should not cross the line of making the letter about you. Austerlitz (2014) reminds us that a condolence letter is an "act of self-erasure" requiring the writer to be "capable of turning its attention away from itself, and toward a missing other." This line was undoubtedly crossed in the Seneca's *consolatio* to his mother, which waxed on for pages about philosophy, or when Voltaire referred in his condolence missives to his own health issues and the comfort he would find in the arms of an amorous pursuit, his niece, no less (Carr, 1996)!

Another time to use restraint in sharing one's own loss is with regard to pets. While I wept countless tears when my dog died, referring to your loss of a pet as a comparison to the loss of a human being experienced by the recipient is never appropriate (unless it's a condolence letter on the loss of *their* pet).

**Essential traits.** Most condolence letters contain some reference to one or more essential traits of the deceased, what positive psychology refers to as character strengths. Recalling traits like kindness, wisdom, capacity for love, humor or determination, for example, will always be meaningful, if they are authentic. See [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org) for a list of the 24 character strengths that were identified by positive psychology scholars after consultation with over 50 scholars and philosophers world-wide to ascertain, define and categorize the most universally-recognized and valued human traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).<sup>21</sup> Taking advantage of this vocabulary may also be one way of finding the right words.

Even if you didn't know the deceased enough to identify their traits, these can often be inferred from a simple observation ("I remember meeting your mother at your birthday celebration and being impressed at her vitality, smarts, and humor"), or obtained through other sources, such as an obituary, or what the recipient (or someone else) may have reported ("the note you posted announcing his death tells a story of a deep father-daughter connection and an example of wisdom and perseverance, and so I imagine that this loss has hit you particularly hard").

If there are personal, professional or creative accomplishments that stand out, these can replace or complement references to essential traits, as these examples illustrate:

- A strong family role: "he always made everyone in the house feel so welcome"
- Professional accomplishments: "her contribution to ---- was transformative"
- Creative accomplishments: "he will always be remembered for ----."

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<sup>21</sup>The director of the VIA Institute on Character, Ryan Niemiec, has likened character strengths to the traits that you might expect to be mentioned in a eulogy or on a tombstone.

**Story-telling.** Including at least one story about the deceased is a good way to further personalize the condolence letter. The stories need not be serious or call up virtuous qualities of the deceased. The story or stories can be based on personal knowledge, information received over time from the recipient or from someone else, or publicly-available information. One person told me that they always google the deceased before writing a condolence letter to capture appropriate details or stories. Depending on the circumstances and relationship, this may be one place where some kind of levity may be appropriate: “No Thanksgiving would be complete without ----'s jokes,” or “I’ll never forget the time that ----”.

**Advice.** Condolence letters throughout history are replete with the writer’s consoling advice for the recipient. Many writers urged action of some kind, from Seneca’s own pursuit of philosophy, to Cicero’s advocating of liberal studies to his mother, to Samuel Johnson’s urging his friend to write down memories of the deceased, to Charles Dickens’ suggestion that his sister “parcel out the day, to find occupation regularly or to make it.”

Many writers encourage the recipient to trust in the healing effects of passage of time: the Muslim papyri of the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century counseled patience above all; Thomas Jefferson wrote that “time and silence are the only medicines”; and Johannes Brahms counseled Clara Schumann to believe in “the divine gift of hope . . . for you know perfectly well that pleasant months will follow your present unpleasant ones, just as they do in every period of unhappiness.”

Others seek to create some meaning from the loss. Lincoln recognized the sacrifice of the deceased in conveying to Lydia Bixby on the death of her sons the “thanks of the Republic they died to save.” Einstein urged Queen Elizabeth of Belgium not to grieve her husband, but to celebrate him as one who was “privileged to accomplish in full measure their task in life.” Steward Stern wrote to the family of James Dean how his death served to highlight the good by

underscoring the contrast with the negative, without which the good would be “white marble on unmelting snow.”

Another recurring theme conveyed by writers of condolence letters over history is the consolation in finding the spirit of the deceased in the afterlife, as did both Samuel Johnson and Benjamin Franklin, when they referred, respectively, to “that union that has received divine approbation shall continue to eternity,” and “we are soon to follow, and we know where to find him.”

This being said, whether or not to include such types of consoling advice constitutes an important exercise of practical wisdom. Advocating meaning when the recipient is in the throes of grief may fall more than flat. Joan Didion (2005) described her immediate reaction to the loss of her husband as “the very opposite of meaning” and “the experience of meaningless itself.” For the more religious, expressions of faith can be deeply meaningful and comforting. For the less religious, receiving a letter with traditional references to religion may feel offensive. Rice (2019) advises that saying “This is God’s plan” is generally not a good idea. One person I interviewed still had hurt and anger in her voice almost forty years after her husband died in an automobile accident, recalling the message she received to the effect that she could take solace in her husband having joined Jesus.

**Legacy.** One way of helping find meaning is to focus on a positive legacy arising from the loss. There are many examples arising in presidential condolences for deaths in service to the country, such as President Lincoln’s consolatory words of the “solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom”, or Nixon’s reference to “Those who give their own lives to make the freedom of others possible live forever in honor.”

President Johnson wrote to the parents of fallen astronaut Gus Grissom, that their son “guaranteed future generations a knowledge of the universe that will enrich their lives on earth.”

Focusing on more personal positive legacies and the positive psychology construct of generativity, the concern for improving the well-being of future generations, through parenting, educating, or the like, can be equally compelling. When writing my own condolence letters, I often try to emphasize the passing forward of the example of parental love to subsequent generations, as these extracts show:

- I did not know your father, but I am sure that the lessons and example of your relationship with him are the source of your relationship with your children and step-children. You should be proud that you have passed on this legacy of loving parenthood so wonderfully.
- We all want more time with our parent when they were younger. But the memories stay and the impact of fatherhood and grand-fatherhood lives on in us and in our children. There is comfort in that too.
- Your parents’ loving support of you in your adult years provided an inspiring example for you as you embark on the next phase of your own children’s lives: their marriages, children, and their own successes and challenges as adults.

**One last thing – not to include.** Writers of condolence letters throughout history included wholly unrelated topics in their letters, from the Romans’ philosophical musings to the practical concerns included in the Egyptian papyri condolences, like a request for the delivery of 100 walnuts mixed in with expressions of sympathy (Worp, 1995). Similarly, Civil War condolence letters often contained gruesome details of the circumstances of the death as well as

practical logistics concerning the return of the body and personal effects, as was appropriate at that time. Today, any such details, if required, should be addressed in a separate correspondence.

**Sign-off.** Signing off the letter is as important as the first line. A generic “Sincerely yours,” “Best wishes” or even “Love” may be considered as bland (Kane, 2007), and not convey as empathetic a tone as a warmer ending (Rosnan, 2020). A preferable sign-off might be “Sending, again, my sincerest condolences,” “Heartfelt wishes in this hard time,” or “This comes with much love.” This may also be a place to refer to other members of the writer’s family or circle, adding something to the sign-off like “---- joins me in sending our love/condolences,” and/or to other members of the recipient’s family or circle, like “Sending my sincerest condolences to you, ---- and the children – I know how much (the deceased) meant to you all.”

Do not forget to include your address on the correspondence. This allows the recipient to respond, should they so wish (but there should be no subtext of any perceived obligation to do so – some writers even include a note that no response is necessary).

## **General**

The significant positive outcomes for the writer derived from engaging in the practice of condolence letters described in my capstone will depend on the writer’s level of engagement with the process. Writing a few words on a sympathy card will not give rise to the same outcomes for either the writer or the recipient as spending time in thoughtful reflection and expressive writing that captures some combination of character strengths, meaning, hope and/or legacy. Moreover, although this reflective activity is focused towards another (the recipient and/or the deceased), it may well offer a rare opportunity for the writer to pause and reflect on

the sources of meaning in their *own* lives and how they want to be remembered *themselves*.

Accordingly, embrace the process – and make it a habit – in order to reap the benefits.

There are positive relationship outcomes to this practice as well. Condolence letters often trigger a response. This may only be a printed card acknowledging receipt, often annotated by hand with a few words of appreciation. It may also be a more personal letter responding to the message(s) in the condolence letter, or another form of reaching out by the recipient. In such case, this follow-up exchange can be the manifestation of a strengthening of the bonds between the recipient and the writer, perhaps extending to their families or circles, another positive outcome of this activity. Embrace the outcome as well.

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