

## When Death Comes Knocking

Written by L.A. Plume

Tuesday, 16 March 2010 10:47

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*Dear Ms. Plume,*

*The husband of a friend died suddenly and I didn't know what to do for her; any suggestions?*

*Sadie*

Dear Sadie,

That's a good question, because when death takes us by surprise, it's often frightening and confusing. You want to do something, the right thing, the comforting thing, but you don't want to smother her. What you do depends on how close a friend you are.

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First, the minute you hear, call, then write. When you call, remember this isn't the time for a long chat unless she initiates it.

When you write, be certain not to say "I know how you feel" ~ because you don't. Say something that will evoke a fond memory like, "I'll never forget the time we spent in the islands together," or "I'll always remember how he loved crazy shirts." Add that you'll do whatever she thinks might help, like "I'll call the crowd from college."

If you're a very close friend, ask if she'd like you to come. If she says No, because her house is full of people, don't be hurt; just plan to visit when the dust settles. If she says Yes, hop in your car or get on a plane as soon as you can. If possible, leave the visit open-ended so you can stay longer if she needs you, or you can leave early, if not.

When you're in her home, follow her lead. Try to be near her when she wants, go in your room if she wants to be alone. Help where you can: empty the dishwasher, let the dog out, feed the cat. For most other chores, ask first; she may not want you to wash her sheets, since she might really take comfort in any reminders of John around her. Keep track of sympathy notes, leave them in their envelopes in case she doesn't have every address. Keep track of phone calls, too.

Offer to do errands: can you pick someone up at the train, get her black suit from the dry cleaner, run to the market and get paper goods? While you're there, get the economy size package of tissues.

Should you take food? In the South, it's a given that friends should bring food ~ and they do. The key isn't quantity. You should take into consideration how many people need to be fed. Finger, or snack, foods are the best ~ things like a chicken or fruit salad, cookies, cheese and crackers. When folks are bereaved, they don't want/can't manage three real meals. They want to eat something that only requires a plate and fork at best. Don't forget the cardinal rule for taking food anywhere: use a sturdy, disposable container. Or wait a few weeks and take the nice casserole; she can eat it every night, or freeze part of it. Your friend has to eat, and cooking for one can be lonely.

Should you send flowers? Think about how your friend really lives. Does she adore always having a nice bouquet on her hall table? Would she prefer a plant, perhaps one that could go

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into the garden and be a sweet reminder? Cut flowers are a double edge sword – pretty when they arrive but they will wilt and die; that's not always a nice thing to watch just after a death. Better yet, wait awhile, and send your arrangement later, when the house looks bleak and reality is getting harsher.

Should you go to the viewing or services? Yes. Your feelings are not what count, unless you've recently buried someone of your own and it's just too painful. Should you go to the burial? If the date or time is publicly announced in the papers or at the end of the service, you should. If it's a private family burial, the details probably won't be announced. If she calls and specifically invites you, go.

Most of all, remember – we're shocked and saddened by death; our instinct is to reach out and help. But for many of us, it is a reminder of a similar time in our lives, so we do our duty then shrink back. Your friend's house, life, routine, and future are permanently altered. Stay in touch after it's all over and people's lives have gone back to normal. Hers hasn't, so she will need you in the time to come.