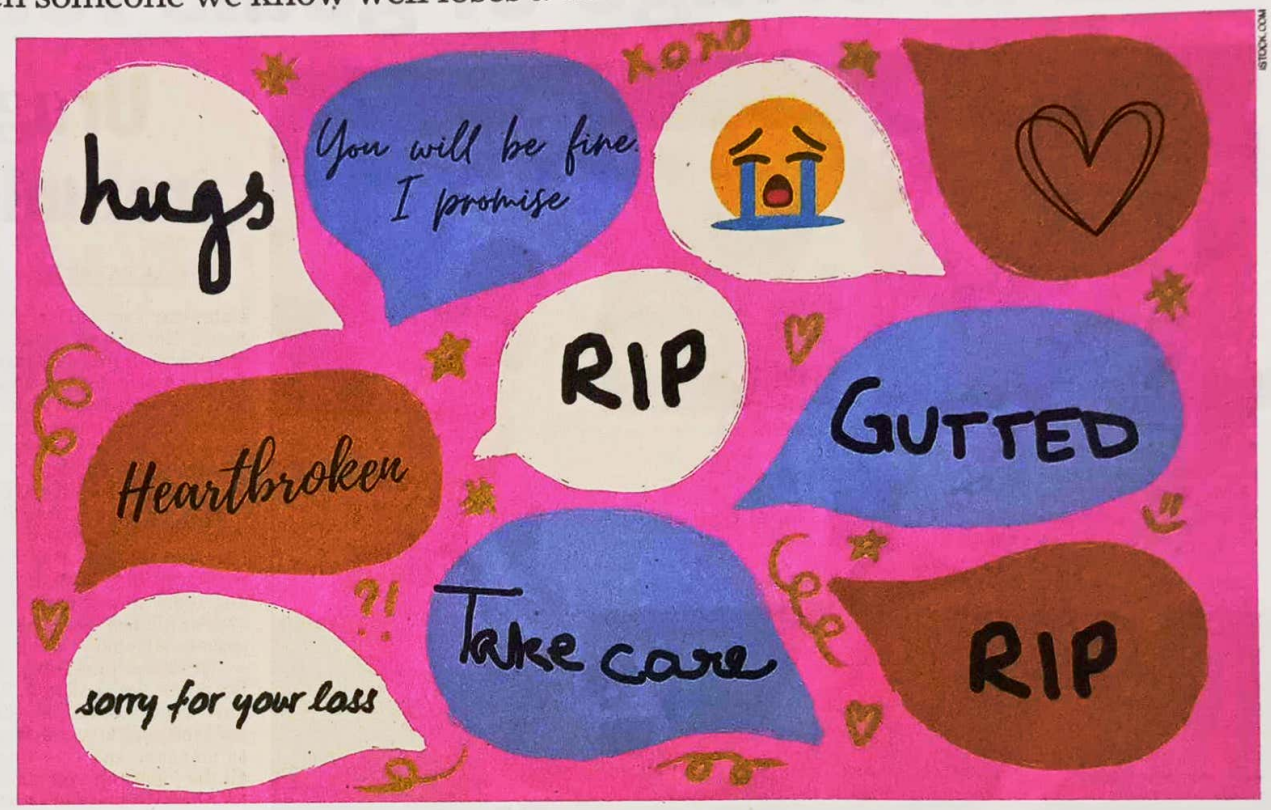
Stopping by the Words

When someone we know well loses a dear one, what do you say?



The group chat window pinged with the news. "Binoy has passed away," it read. Binoy used to man the sandwich-snack-and-tea stall in the middle of an office *para*. He had been at his station, doing his business, even a day or two before he was summoned.

The chat window was suddenly flooded with messages. "My god", "unbelievable", "I spoke to him only last week". And then everything fell quiet. A shocked quiet.

Death for all its inevitability, never ceases to shock. But it is also a fact that it packs a greater punch when it strikes closer to one's own reality, and more so when one is old enough to understand the finality of that never-ever.

In Binoy's case, there was no condolence to be conveyed to anyone, no forwarding address of the bereaved one knew of. But within the small set of erstwhile customers on that WhatsApp group, if you read between the lines, there was a sense of loss that was apparent. The words commending the man for his professionalism, for the way he never brought up his failing health — all of it was an idiom of grief. All of it seemed appropriate and sincere, and in keeping with the nature of the vacuum newly created.

Appropriate and sincere is not easy to achieve in condolence and post-condolence messages. Not these days, even when the very act of communication has been made easy with the click of a button, emojis aplenty, templated responses and, of course, AI assistants.

"Take care" is the most common response to a newly-bereaved. It is also possibly the most benign. Some will send hugs, some hearts, some a teary face. And then there are those who, if they can help it, will say nothing. You would have heard a lot of them admit, "I don't know what to say."

Many, by reflex, ask after the age of the dear departed and, if the person was old or ailing, cannot help but add "it is all for the best". Many hurry to add that the new abode is a better place, and there will always be that person who says " Your Lost One is always around, looking out for you, etc., etc."

There must be some wisdom in these utterances. One cannot say that none of it is genuine. And yet a lot of those who have been at the receiving end of these will tell you they have been angered by such assembly-line communication.

A young lawyer once wrote to me months after her father's death saying as much. She was considering sharing an account of her grieving process with **The Telegraph** but decided at the last minute that it was all too raw, too personal to be put out. I am not at liberty to identify her or quote from her proposed article but I still remember how she wrapped up her last note to me.

She said, "People seem to expect that once the death has happened you can just get up, dust off all the loss business and catch up over drinks as if nothing has happened." She had added, "Even the person sitting next to me at work cannot tell that six months later, I am still crying inside. I don't blame them, but is grief such a rarity that so few should make the effort to understand what goes on inside the bereaved?"

Even 20 years ago, there was a rulebook for extending condolences. It was customary to pay a visit to the bereaved, to write a letter which was much longer than texts. Even a phone call was considered in many cases too easy, too pat.

MIDWEEK MUSINGS

With advances in communication technology, a lot of that has changed. But availability, even accessibility of faster mediums of communication, does not necessarily equal effective engagement, no? Meaningful and context-appropriate communication needs effort, is born of emotional intelligence. There is that line from the OTT series *Downton Abbey* where a househelp asks housekeeper Mrs Hughes what to say to a colleague who is mired in personal troubles. She asks, "How will I face her?" Mrs Hughes replies, "With kindness, I hope."

A lot of people I spoke to for this piece told me they feel offended when even those they thought knew them well, knew the nature of their relationship with the bereaved, suggest they get past their grief and get on with life with immediate professional help. But one wise-beyond-years GenZ said to me: "This vacuum and ache is for life. I suppose, one wouldn't want the vacuum to be gone. Even if it's painful."

So how do you know what to say or write or even do when someone close to you is bereaved, one might ask. Truth is no one knows any of those answers. But much like de la Mare's poem, if you have been listening with attention and some heart, you will know and what you said will be heard.

Nothing can reverse death and loss but a kind, felt word does leave an imprint. It takes a fraction of the edge away.

A friend tells me after his father died, of all the messages he received, he remembered two verbatim. Both had an imagery in common — the umbrella. One of them was an email from a well-known publisher titled "Man with the Umbrella". It had a piece he had written to his son when his own father had died some years ago. That day, by way of condolence and shared grief he had sent his friend that deeply personal note. The second message was from an older former colleague and comprised two words. It read: "Umbrella gone."

As for Binoy, one of his customers had a thought — to leave some flowers at the now empty work station.

Upala Sen