

LEGACY & FAMILY CONVERSATIONS / FAMILY EDUCATION SERIES

The Things We Wish We'd Said

The importance of speaking from the heart before goodbye becomes forever.

By Ron L. Germann

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The Things We Wish We’d Said



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There are few regrets more painful than the words we never spoke.

The apology we intended to make. The forgiveness we meant to offer. The gratitude we assumed was understood. The simple words “I love you” that somehow became unnecessary because we believed there would always be another opportunity to say them.

And then, one day, there isn't.

Death has a way of making ordinary conversations suddenly extraordinary. Words that once seemed difficult, uncomfortable, or even unnecessary become the very words we would give anything to speak or hear just one more time.

We often think of unfinished conversations as something the living must carry after a death. But there is another side to this experience: the person approaching death may have just as much left unsaid. They, too, may be carrying apologies, fears, gratitude, hopes, and reassurances they desperately want to share.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give one another is the opportunity to speak honestly, lovingly, and without fear while there is still time.

When Tomorrow Is No Longer Promised

Most of us live with the quiet assumption that tomorrow will resemble today. We postpone difficult conversations because they make us uncomfortable, because we don't know how to begin, or because we believe the right moment will eventually present itself.

Sometimes it does. Sometimes it never comes.

A sudden heart attack, an accident, or an unexpected illness can end a life without warning. Even when death follows a prolonged illness, families sometimes discover that the conversations they intended to have were postponed until their loved one was no longer able

to participate.

What remains can be an emotional burden that lasts for years.

A daughter may wish she had thanked her father for the sacrifices she never recognized as a child. A husband may regret allowing a trivial disagreement to become the final conversation with his wife. A mother may wonder whether her son truly understood how proud she was of the man he became.

These regrets are not necessarily evidence that love was absent. Often, they exist precisely because love was so deeply present.

But love that is felt and love that is expressed are not always the same thing.

The Four Conversations That Matter Most

When someone is seriously ill or approaching the end of life, conversations need not be elaborate or perfectly expressed. Often, the most meaningful words are also the simplest.

Four expressions can carry extraordinary emotional significance.

“I love you.”

Love should never have to depend entirely on assumption. Even when it has been demonstrated through decades of devotion, hearing those words can provide comfort that actions alone cannot always convey.

“Thank you.”

Acknowledge the sacrifices, kindnesses, lessons, and ordinary acts of love that shaped your life. Sometimes the smallest memories carry the greatest meaning.

“I'm sorry. Please forgive me.”

An honest apology can relieve years of emotional distance. It does not erase what happened, but it may create an opportunity for understanding and peace.

“I will be okay. You can rest.”

When sincerely offered, reassurance can help someone who is dying feel less responsible for the people they are leaving behind. It is not a promise that grief will be easy, but an expression of love and determination to continue.

These words do not guarantee a peaceful death or an uncomplicated grieving process. But they can create moments of connection that remain meaningful long after the final goodbye.

What the Dying May Need to Say

We frequently focus on what families should say to someone approaching death. Yet the dying person may be struggling with an equally important question:

What do I need the people I love to know before I leave them?

For a parent, it may be reassurance that each child was loved, even when relationships were complicated or circumstances made affection difficult to express. For a husband or wife, it may be gratitude for years of companionship, forgiveness for past disappointments, or an acknowledgment of the life they built together.

Sometimes it is permission.

A dying spouse may worry that the person left behind will feel guilty about eventually finding companionship again. A parent may fear that children will sacrifice their own happiness because they believe continuing to enjoy life somehow diminishes the memory of someone who has died.

Imagine the comfort of hearing:

“I want you to live. I want you to laugh again. I want you to find happiness, even when I am no longer here to share it with you. Loving me does not mean you must stop living when I die.”

Such words can become a lasting source of reassurance.

There may also be practical matters that need to be addressed: family stories that should not disappear, important documents, funeral preferences, personal possessions with sentimental meaning, or explanations behind decisions that might otherwise create confusion or resentment.

These conversations are not merely about preparing for death. They are about caring for the people who will continue living.

When Relationships Have Been Difficult

Not every family relationship is defined by warmth, closeness, or uncomplicated love.

Some families carry decades of disappointment, estrangement, broken trust, or unresolved hurt. The approach of death may create an opportunity for reconciliation, but it does not automatically erase the circumstances that caused the distance.

A sincere apology should acknowledge the harm without demanding forgiveness. Likewise, forgiveness cannot be required simply because someone is dying.

Sometimes reconciliation means rebuilding a relationship. Other times, it means expressing compassion while maintaining necessary boundaries. And occasionally, peace comes from accepting that a relationship may never become what we wished it had been.

For those hoping to reconnect, a gentle beginning might be:

“I know things between us haven't always been easy. I don't expect us to resolve everything today, but there are things I would like you to know, if you're willing to listen.”

There is dignity in offering that opportunity without insisting upon a particular outcome.

Closure does not always mean agreement, reconciliation, or forgiveness. Sometimes it simply means knowing that we approached a difficult moment with honesty and compassion.

The Fear of Saying Goodbye

One of the greatest obstacles to meaningful end-of-life conversations is the belief that speaking openly about death will somehow take away hope.

Families may avoid the subject because they fear upsetting their loved one. The dying person may avoid it because they do not want to frighten or burden their family.

Both sides may recognize what is happening, yet continue protecting one another through silence.

The result can be a profound loneliness at precisely the moment when emotional connection matters most.

Talking about death does not require abandoning hope. Hope can change. When recovery is no longer possible, there may still be hope for comfort, meaningful time together, reconciliation, spiritual peace, or the opportunity to leave important messages behind.

A conversation might begin with a simple question:

“Is there anything you've been thinking about that you would like us to talk about?”

Or perhaps:

“I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but I also don't want either of us to miss the chance to say something important.”

Then listen.

Resist the temptation to immediately reassure, correct, or change the subject. Sometimes a dying person needs someone willing to hear their fears without trying to make those fears disappear.

And sometimes they need the freedom not to talk. Respecting that choice is also an expression of love.

When Words Are No Longer Possible

There may come a time when illness, medication, dementia, or physical decline makes meaningful conversation difficult or impossible.

Families often wonder whether they have waited too long.

Even then, connection may remain possible.

Sitting beside someone, holding a hand when welcomed, playing a favorite piece of music, reading a meaningful letter, or quietly recalling shared memories can offer comfort.

When a person is unconscious or unresponsive, we cannot know with certainty what they hear or understand. Nevertheless, speaking gently to them may be meaningful for the family, and familiar voices can sometimes be reassuring.

Say what you wish to say without expecting a response.

Tell them you love them. Thank them. Share a cherished memory. Offer reassurance.

If you are uncertain whether to speak, consider what you would want that person to hear if they could understand every word.

There is no need to perform a perfect goodbye. Sometimes simply being present is enough.

The Conversations That Make Grief Easier to Carry

Grief is not something that can be prevented through preparation. Even the most loving and complete farewell cannot eliminate the pain of losing someone important.

But meaningful conversations before death may change some of the emotional burdens that accompany loss.

Knowing that love was expressed can soften the anguish of wondering whether it was understood. Hearing forgiveness may ease the weight of an old mistake. Understanding someone's wishes may reduce the uncertainty families experience when making funeral decisions.

And hearing a loved one say, “I know you will miss me, but I want you to continue living,” may provide comfort during moments when happiness feels disloyal.

These conversations do not remove sorrow. They can, however, give grief something precious to hold alongside it: reassurance.

Rather than remembering only what was left unfinished, survivors may find themselves returning to words that were spoken, promises that were shared, and moments of honesty that became part of their loved one's enduring legacy.

Practical Ways to Begin Before It Is Too Late

Important conversations need not wait until someone is terminally ill. In fact, some of the most meaningful discussions happen when everyone is healthy enough to participate without the pressure of an approaching death.

Consider making room for these conversations in ordinary life:

1. Express appreciation specifically. Rather than simply saying thank you, explain what someone did and why it mattered. “I never forgot how you came to help me when I was struggling” may mean more than a general expression of gratitude.

2. Address unfinished disagreements. Begin with a desire to understand rather than a determination to prove who was right. Acknowledge your own mistakes without attaching conditions to your apology.

3. Ask questions you may someday wish you had asked. Invite parents and grandparents to share their childhood memories, family histories, greatest joys, regrets, and lessons learned.

4. Talk openly about hopes and fears. Ask what matters most to someone facing serious illness. Avoid assuming that your priorities are necessarily theirs.

5. Discuss funeral and end-of-life wishes. Learn what kind of remembrance would be meaningful, whether religious or cultural traditions matter, and whether arrangements or

funding are already in place.

6. Preserve important messages. Encourage letters, audio recordings, or videos for children, spouses, grandchildren, and other loved ones. These can become treasured gifts long after a death.

7. Don't wait for a special occasion. An ordinary afternoon, a quiet drive, or a conversation over coffee may become one of the most meaningful memories of a lifetime.

These discussions should be invitations, not obligations. A loved one may need time, privacy, or several conversations rather than one emotionally demanding encounter.

Planning Is Another Way of Saying “I Love You”

There is a practical dimension to these conversations that deserves thoughtful attention.

Families often discover after a death that they know remarkably little about what their loved one wanted.

Would Mom have preferred burial or cremation? Did Dad want a traditional funeral or a private gathering? Were there particular songs, readings, or people they hoped would participate? Was there money set aside, or would the children be responsible for expenses?

These questions can become especially painful when family members disagree or financial limitations prevent them from providing the services they believe their loved one would have wanted.

Discussing funeral wishes in advance is not morbid. It is an opportunity to replace uncertainty with understanding.

For the person doing the planning, it can also be an expression of responsibility and affection.

“I don't want you to have to guess what I wanted. I don't want you arguing over decisions when you should be supporting one another. And I don't want the financial burden of my wishes to become yours.”

Putting preferences in writing, communicating them to the appropriate people, and considering how arrangements will be funded can spare survivors difficult decisions during an already painful time.

A funeral plan cannot take away grief. But it can help protect a family from avoidable confusion, disagreement, and financial distress.

Just as importantly, it allows the funeral itself to become what it should be: an opportunity to remember, honor, and begin healing.

For Those Who Never Had the Chance

Perhaps the most important reassurance in any discussion of unfinished conversations is this:

Not everyone gets the opportunity to say goodbye.

Death can arrive without warning. Relationships can remain complicated. Illness may steal someone's ability to communicate long before the family understands what is happening.

For those left behind, the absence of a final conversation can become a source of persistent regret.

Why didn't I call? Why did I let that argument continue? Did she know I loved her? Did he understand how much he meant to me?

These questions are deeply human. But they deserve to be considered with compassion.

A lifetime of love is not defined solely by its final conversation. Relationships are built through years of shared experiences, ordinary gestures, sacrifices, laughter, and even imperfections.

One missed opportunity does not erase everything that came before it.

For some, writing a letter to the person who died can provide a meaningful way to express what remains unsaid. Others find comfort speaking aloud at a graveside, sharing memories with family, or incorporating a personal message into a funeral or memorial service.

These acts cannot recreate a conversation that never occurred. But they can provide a place for love, sorrow, and unfinished feelings to be expressed.

When regret becomes overwhelming or interferes with daily life, a grief counselor or trusted support professional may help a person work through those emotions without allowing them to overshadow the entire relationship.

The goal of healing is not to pretend that nothing was left unsaid. It is to learn that love can remain meaningful even when a goodbye was incomplete.

Before the Words Become Memories

Someday, each of us will have a final conversation with someone we love.

Most of us will not recognize it when it happens.

It may be an ordinary telephone call, a hurried goodbye at the door, a quiet exchange before bedtime, or a conversation that ends with the familiar promise, “I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

That uncertainty is not a reason to live in fear of death. It is a reason to be more intentional about life.

Tell your parents what they mean to you. Tell your children how proud you are of them. Thank the person who stood beside you when life was difficult. Apologize when you have caused pain. Offer forgiveness when you are ready and when it is appropriate.

And if you are the one approaching the end of life, remember that your words still have the power to comfort, encourage, heal, and reassure the people you love.

You may not be able to spare them the pain of losing you. But you may be able to leave them something that will sustain them through that pain.

A memory of your voice.

An expression of pride.

A long-awaited apology.

Permission to find happiness again.

The certainty that they were loved.

In the end, we cannot control how much time we are given. But while we have the ability to speak, we can choose what we leave unsaid.

Because the most meaningful words in our lives should not have to become the greatest regrets after a death.

MyPrePlanning.com is dedicated to helping individuals and families approach funeral planning, grief, and remembrance with greater understanding, compassion, and peace of

mind. Through education and thoughtful preparation, we believe families can preserve meaningful traditions, reduce unnecessary burdens, and focus on what matters most: honoring a life and caring for one another.