

# Funeral Etiquette:



A guide to  
thoughtful  
behavior.

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*When someone you know dies,  
or faces a death in their family, your  
first instinct is to help —  
but you may not be sure what  
to say or what to do. It is  
natural to feel this way.*



It is natural to want to help a friend or family member during their time of grief. This booklet has been prepared to guide you in the proper etiquette of funerals and visitations, and to make you feel more confident knowing your actions are appropriate. It will also give you helpful advice on how you can be of comfort to the bereaved.



# The Condolence Visit.

*While you may feel hesitant about intruding on the family during their grief, a condolence visit is important. It reassures the bereaved that while their loved one is gone, they are not alone; that while they have suffered a great loss, they are still connected to the living, and that life will, indeed, go on.*

## *When should I visit?*

Immediately upon learning of a death, intimate friends of the family should go to the home of the mourner to offer sympathy and ask if they can render any service. There are many ways you can be helpful, by providing food or assisting with child care, making phone calls or answering the door.

You may make a condolence visit at any time, before the funeral or after, especially in the first weeks following the death. If you call early you may certainly pay another visit to let the bereaved know they remain in your thoughts.

You may prefer to visit the family at the funeral home. This setting may be more comfortable for you and the family, as they are prepared for visitors. The newspaper will provide information about visiting hours, or you may call the funeral home for instructions.

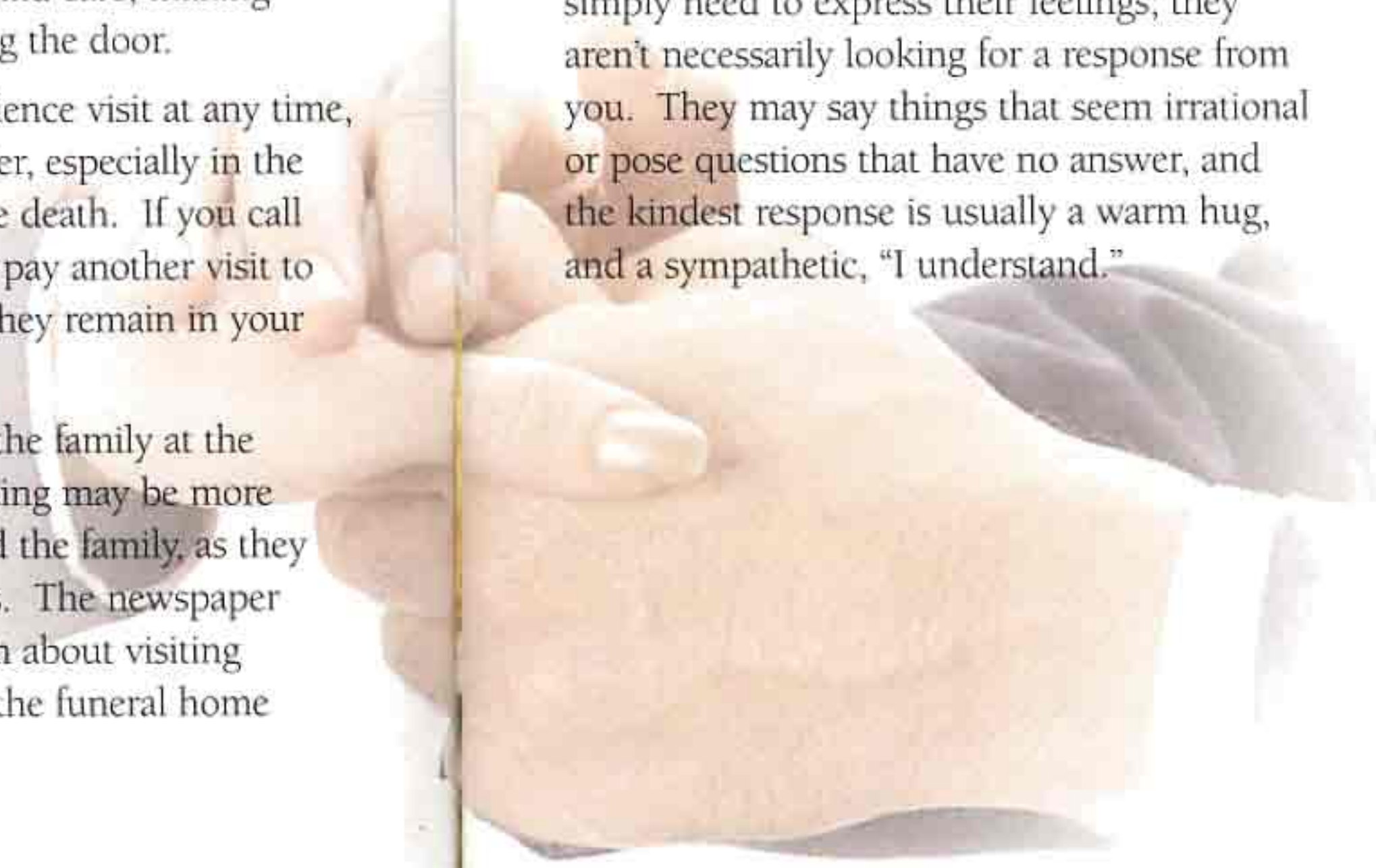
## *How long should I stay at a condolence call or visitation?*

You need not stay long; fifteen minutes gives you enough time to express your sympathy and offer your support. Of course, if the bereaved indicates they would like you to remain for a while, take your cue from them and stay longer. Use your own judgement. If you feel your presence is of comfort, offer to stay as long as the family needs you and you are able.

## *What should I say?*

Using your own words, express your sympathy. Kind words about the deceased are always appropriate. Depending on your relationship to the family, you may say something like: "I am so sorry about John. He was a good friend, and I will miss him very much."

If the bereaved wants to talk, they usually simply need to express their feelings; they aren't necessarily looking for a response from you. They may say things that seem irrational or pose questions that have no answer, and the kindest response is usually a warm hug, and a sympathetic, "I understand."





## *What should I not say?*

Do not ask the cause of death; if the family wants to discuss it, let them bring it up.

Don't give advice. The family should be allowed to make their own decisions without influence from well-meaning friends.

Don't make comments that would diminish the importance of the loss. Comments such as "you are young, you'll marry again," or "he was suffering so much, death was a blessing," or "I've been through this myself," are not comforting to the bereaved.

## *Religious & ethnic customs.*

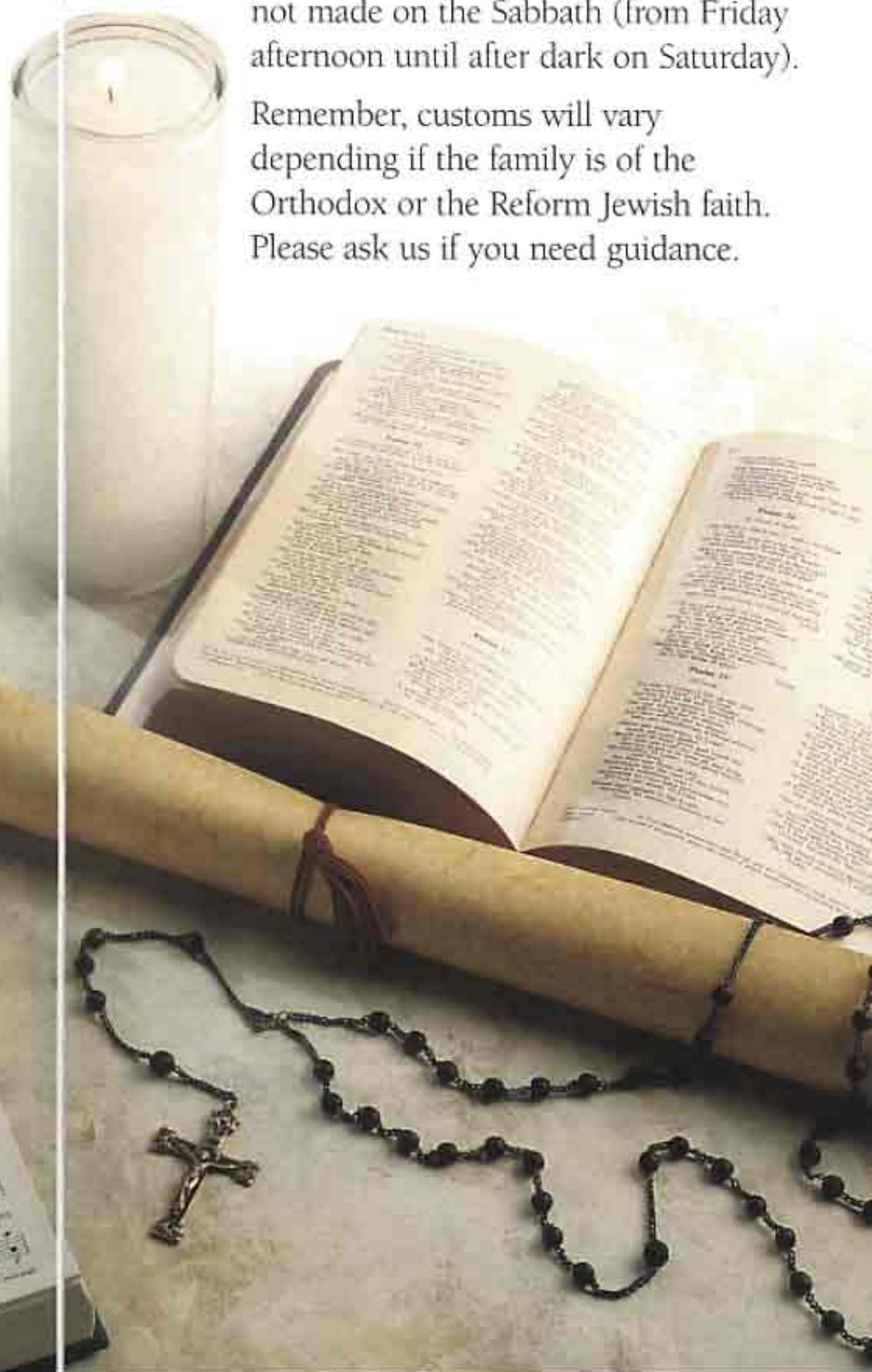
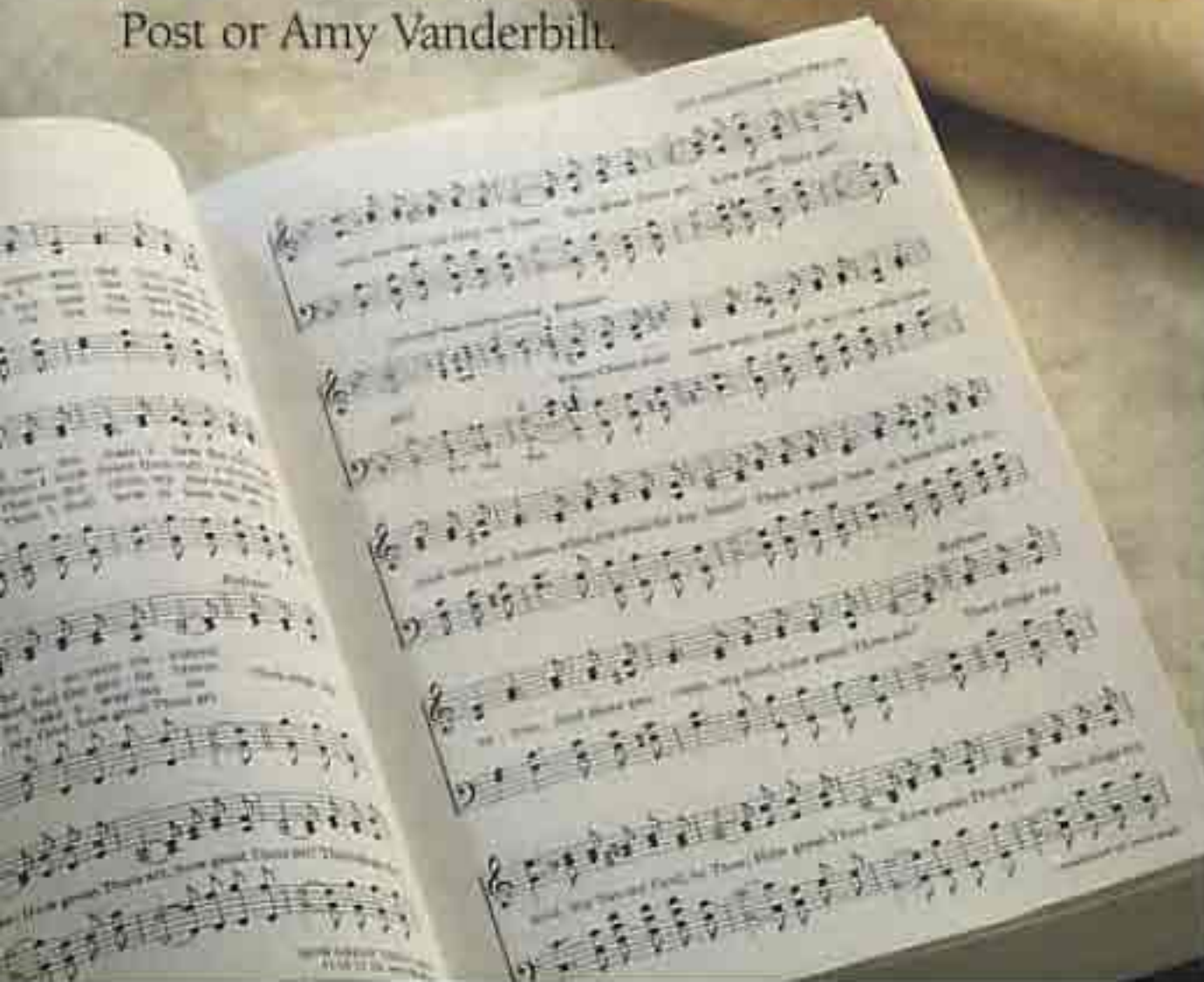
Customs may differ among various communities, ethnic groups, and religions, and we have tried to indicate a few of the most important differences here. Please feel free to contact us for guidance, as we are well versed in the customs of many faiths. For more details, you may also refer to a more comprehensive guide, such as those by Emily Post or Amy Vanderbilt.

## *Mourning in the Jewish faiths.*

In families of Jewish faiths, interment of the deceased usually occurs within twenty-four hours of death, at which time the family returns home for a seven-day period of mourning. The first days of mourning are reserved for the family; friends usually wait until at least the third day to visit. Calls are generally made in the evenings or on the Sunday of the week of the death; calls are

not made on the Sabbath (from Friday afternoon until after dark on Saturday).

Remember, customs will vary depending if the family is of the Orthodox or the Reform Jewish faith. Please ask us if you need guidance.





# The Formal Visitation.

*A formal visitation provides a time and place for friends to offer their expressions of sorrow and sympathy. This practice is most common among the Protestant and Catholic faiths. The obituary notice should tell you the visitation hours and when the family will be present, or you may call the funeral home for this information.*



## *Meet the family.*

Upon arrival, go to the family, and express your sympathy with an embrace or by offering your hands. Don't feel as though you must avoid talking about the person who has died. Talking can help the grieving process begin. Offer a simple statement of condolence, such as "I'm so sorry. My sympathy to you and your family," or "Your grandmother was a fine person. She will be missed by many."

If you were an acquaintance of the deceased but not well-known to the family, immediately introduce yourself. You may say something like, "Hello, we have not met, but George and I worked together several years ago. My name is Mary Smith."

## *Emotions.*

Do not feel uncomfortable if you or the bereaved becomes emotional or begins to cry. Allowing the bereaved to grieve is a natural healing process. However, if you find yourself becoming extremely upset, it would be kinder to excuse yourself so as not to increase the strain on the family.

## *Pay your respects to the person who has died.*

Viewing the deceased is not mandatory. However, if offered by the family, it is customary to show your respects by viewing the deceased and, if you desire, spending a few moments in silent prayer. The family may wish to escort you to the casket, or you may proceed on your own.





# Other Expressions of Condolences.

*While there is no substitute for a personal visit if you are physically able to do so, there are many other ways to express your sympathy.*

## *Flowers.*

A floral tribute can be of great comfort to the family. If you can imagine walking into a room filled with the loveliness and the soft fragrance of beautiful flowers, you can understand how something so simple can be so meaningful.

You may send your flowers to the funeral home or the residence before the funeral. It is also appropriate to send flowers to the residence after the funeral. Your florist can guide you in selecting something appropriate within your price range.

There are only a few exceptions when flowers are not appropriate. If the family requests flowers be omitted, or that donations in lieu of flowers be made, you should honor the request. You should not send flowers to an Orthodox Jewish funeral. Flowers are not sent to a Catholic church, although they are welcomed at the funeral home. Protestant churches will generally accept flowers, but many families prefer flowers be sent to the funeral home, with the casket having a floral offering from the family for the funeral.

## *Signing the register.*

Always enter your name in the register book, using your full name so the family can better identify you. If you were a business associate of the deceased, it is appropriate to note your company affiliation if the family may not otherwise know you.

## *Conduct.*

After you have spoken to the family, it is perfectly appropriate to engage in quiet conversation with friends you may meet at the visitation. Your simple presence will mean a lot to the family. You do not need to stay for the entire visitation, but try not to leave during prayers, if they are being offered.



## Mass Cards.

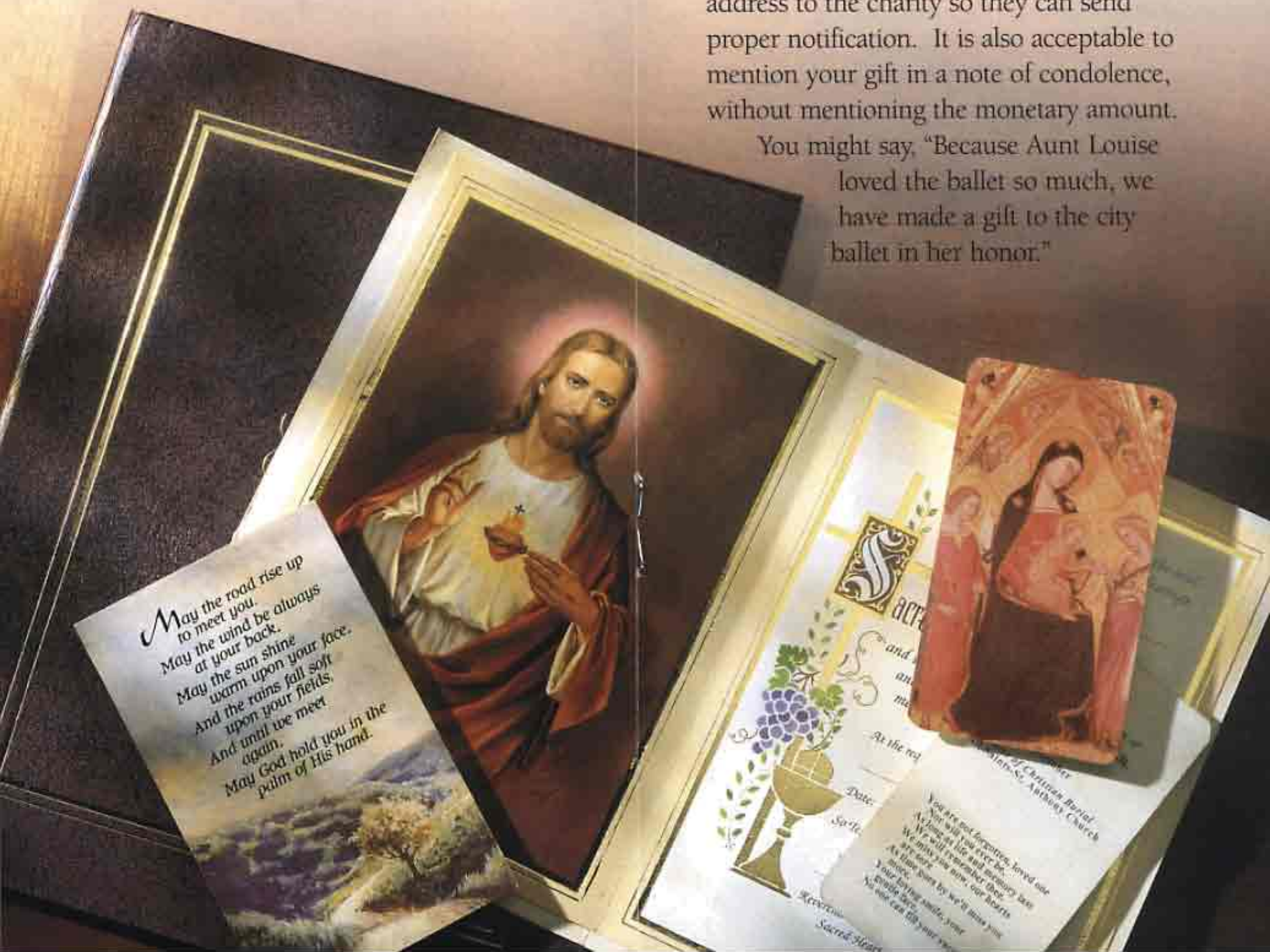
If the deceased was Catholic, mass cards can be sent instead of or in addition to flowers. A mass can be arranged for the deceased. Contact us for information about obtaining a mass card, which you may mail or give personally to the family, usually before the funeral. Or, you may leave your card on the tray provided at the funeral home. It is also appropriate to arrange a mass on the anniversary of the death.

## Memorial Gifts.

A gift of remembrance is always appropriate, especially when the family requests such a gift in lieu of flowers. It is nice to personalize your gift to the deceased, for example, by making a gift to his or her alma mater, or contributing to medical research for the disease they suffered. Or, the family will suggest a specific charity or other memorial fund.

We can provide you with the appropriate card to inform the family of your gift. You should also provide the family's name and address to the charity so they can send proper notification. It is also acceptable to mention your gift in a note of condolence, without mentioning the monetary amount.

You might say, "Because Aunt Louise loved the ballet so much, we have made a gift to the city ballet in her honor."





## *Cards and notes.*

Sending a card of sympathy is always in good taste, even if you were simply an acquaintance of the deceased. If the family is not likely to recognize your name, it is kind to add a few words to your expressions of sympathy, such as "Margaret and I were classmates in college ..."

If you were well-acquainted with the deceased and/or the family, a personal note is a gracious way to convey your feelings. These letters are often saved and treasured by the family. Like flowers, they are tangible symbols of caring.

The best letters are simple but sincere expressions of your sympathy for the family, of your affection for the deceased, and your desire to be of some help to the family. Try to relate a personal and fond memory of the deceased — how you first met, perhaps — and also tell how he or she may have influenced your life. And of course, all notes should be handwritten.

## *Phone calls.*

If you are local, a visit is preferred. Out-of-town friends should telephone as soon as possible to offer condolences and offer their services. Keep your call brief, since many others will be calling at this time. If a friend or family member is fielding phone calls for the mourners, be sure to leave your name and a brief message, and ask if there is a good time when you may call again.

## *Email.*

Email is appropriate from those who are not intimate with the family, for example, a business associate or a former neighbor. The family will appreciate your message of concern.





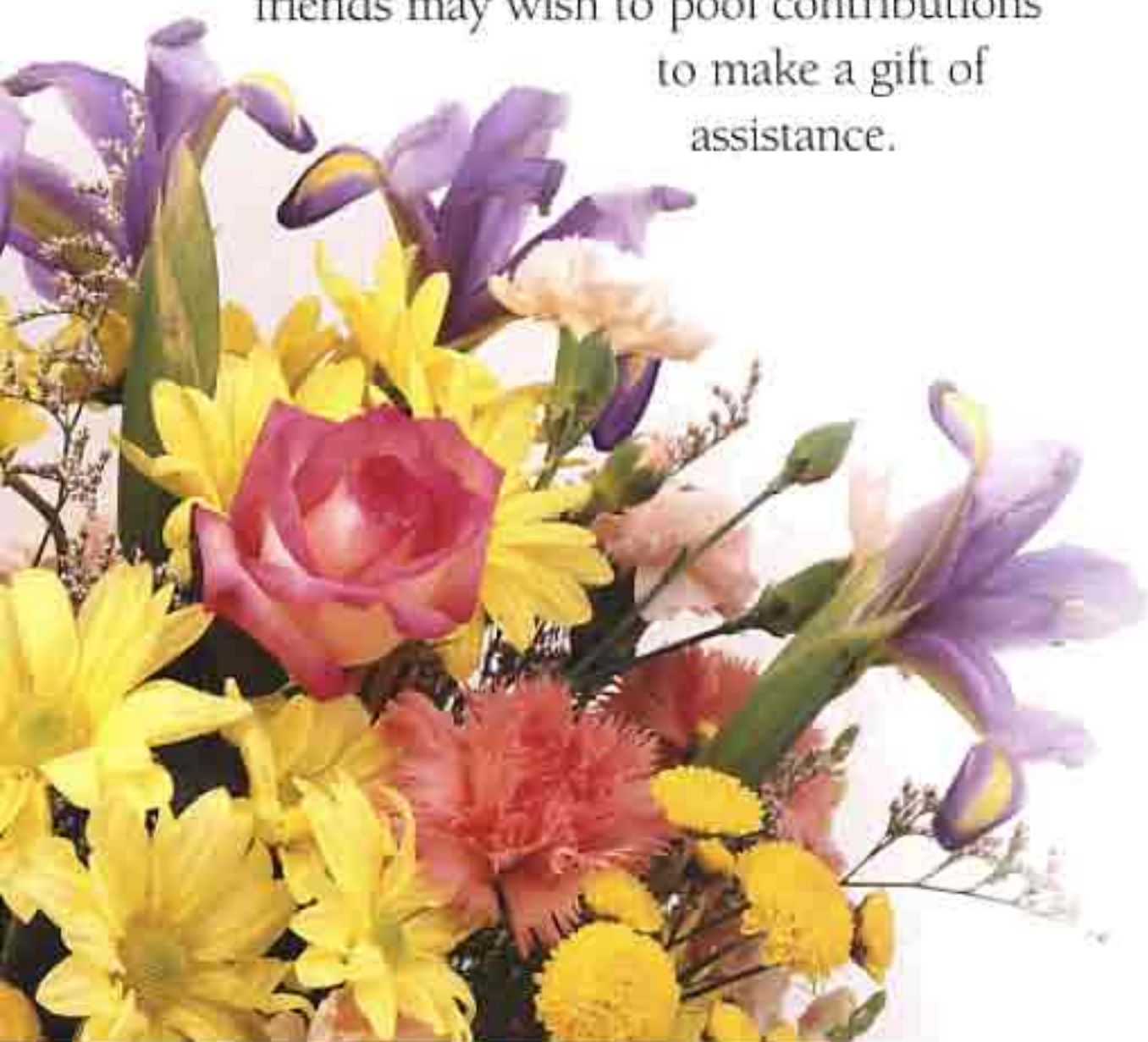
## *Gifts for the family.*

The most welcome gift at this time is food. The bereaved may have little interest or energy for managing household duties. Also, there may be several visitors in the house who need to be fed. During the days immediately following the death, bring substantial dishes that require little preparation other than perhaps reheating. Or, you may want to bring something to help the family with their hosting duties, such as cookies or some other food they may serve to visitors.

It would also be kind to remember the children, they may be going through a difficult time. Also, a small gift such as a book or a quiet toy like a puzzle would be appropriate.

Give your time. Volunteer to undertake a specific task to ease the family's strain — watch the children, care for the pets, vacuum the house, run errands.

Money is not an appropriate gift, although exceptions may be made when the family is left in extreme financial difficulty. In that case, friends may wish to pool contributions to make a gift of assistance.



# The Funeral Service.

*The funeral service will differ depending on the religious and personal beliefs of the family. The service may be held at a church, temple, funeral home, or residence. Most families choose the funeral home as the setting, with a brief service often following at graveside.*

## *Seating.*

Whether the service is held at the funeral home or at a place of worship, enter quietly and be seated. Depending on the size of the funeral, you may be assisted by an usher. The first few rows are usually reserved for family members, but you should feel free to sit closely behind them to offer your support and comfort.

## *The ceremony.*

The ceremony is generally conducted by a member of the clergy. Do not worry if you are unfamiliar with the religious customs of the family. Follow the guide of others.



## *Conclusion of ceremony.*

Often, the family will want a few private moments with their loved one after the ceremony. If you are informed the service is concluded, you will want to leave promptly, and wait in your car if you plan to be part of the funeral procession.

You are not obligated to participate in the procession, but the final moments can be difficult for the family.

Please turn on your headlights so you will be identified as part of the procession, and remember to turn them off when you arrive at the cemetery.

## *At the cemetery.*

If there is a graveside service, the chairs at the casket are reserved for immediate family members. You may be asked to stand for the brief graveside service, which may include a short prayer or other words of strength and encouragement. An announcement is generally made at the end of the remarks indicating if the family will be receiving visitors at home following the service.

## *What is appropriate dress?*

Black is not required for the visitation or the funeral. You should dress in a way to show respect to the family and other mourners. This usually means a suit and conservative tie for men, and conservative clothes for women. Children should be dressed in their better clothes, such as what they might wear to church. The most important thing is not how you are dressed, but that you are there.

## *Should children come to a funeral?*

Parents are the best judge of whether their child is old enough to comprehend death and whether attending the funeral will be meaningful to them. It is important children be allowed to express their grief and share in this important ritual. Children can be naturally uplifting to those in grief, a hopeful reminder of the future. If you bring young children, carefully explain to them the importance of being on their very best behavior. If a very young child becomes cranky or noisy, remove them promptly so as not to disturb the dignity of the occasion.





# Immediately After the Funeral.

*Immediately after the funeral, the family often extends an open invitation to join them for food and a quiet reception at home. This provides an opportunity for friends and family to talk, and provides some rest and refreshment, especially for those who have traveled to the funeral.*

It is a nice gesture to offer to bring food ahead of time for this post-funeral gathering. Your offer of food at any time in the days, weeks, and even months after a death will be greatly appreciated by the family since they will be busy attending to other details while also trying to cope with the day-to-day routine. Be specific in your offer; for example, you may say, "I would like to prepare a chicken casserole for your dinner. May I bring it over on Thursday?"

# Afterwards.

*After the difficult and busy days surrounding a death, the family is faced with the challenge of resuming their lives. Your understanding and help at this time can be a major comfort.*

## *What should I say when I run into the bereaved in public?*

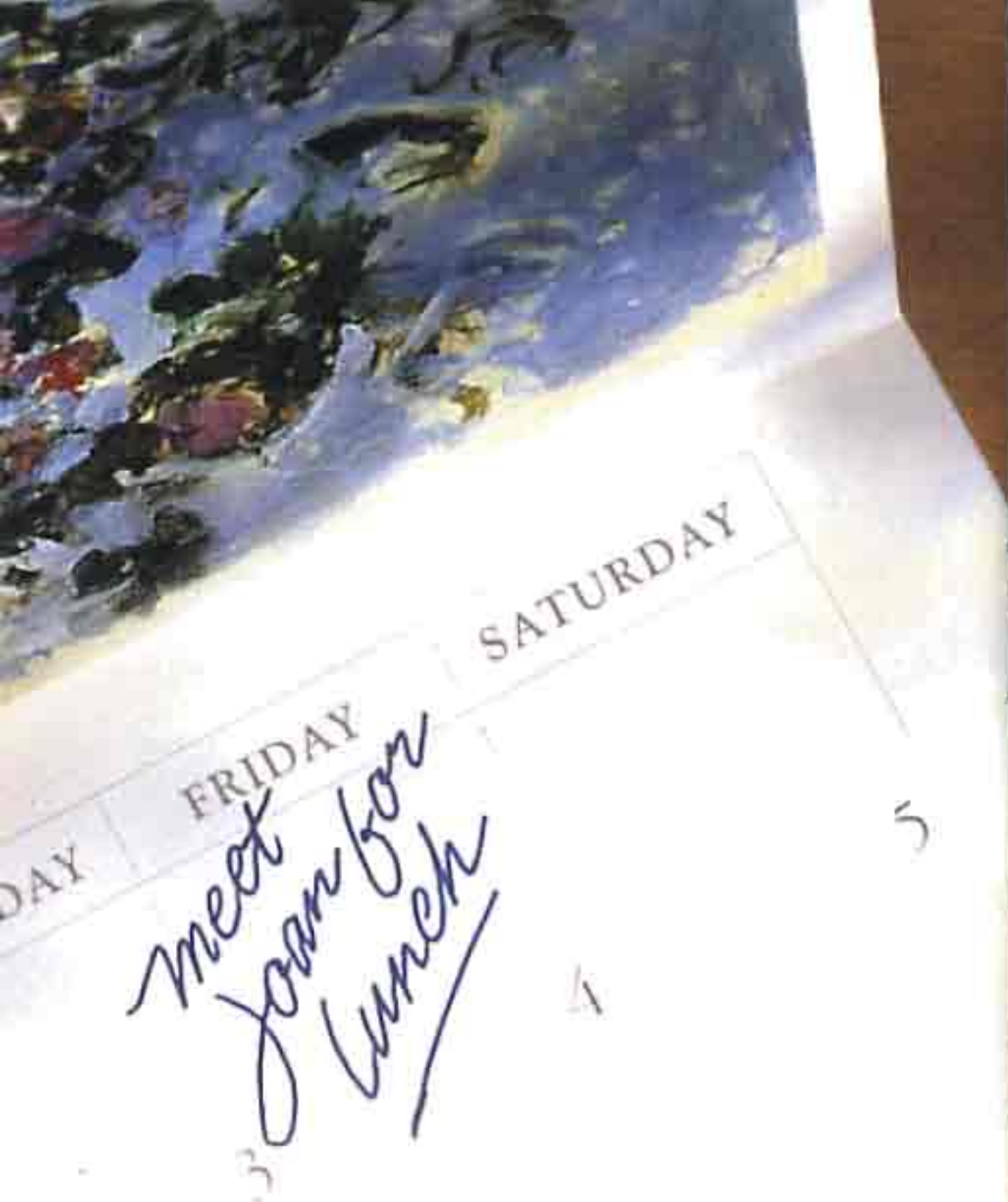
What you say depends upon whether or not you have already had contact with the bereaved. If you made a condolence call, or attended the visitation or funeral, simply greet your friend warmly and express an interest in their well-being.

If this is your first meeting since the death, your impulse may be to express your sympathy. However, it is kinder to not bring up the death directly, as you may bring about tears, which, in a public place, could be painful to your friend. Rather, be tactful with your comments, perhaps saying something like, "These must be difficult days for you ..."

If you wish, inquire when a good time might be to visit, or make a specific invitation to lunch or dinner.







### *What can I do to help later?*

The family will continue to need your support for many months to come. Don't disappear after the funeral. Drop a note or make a phone call on a regular basis. Ask them to lunch. Continue to include them in your social plans; they will let you know when and if they are ready to participate.

It is also especially kind to remember the family on special occasions during the first year of their bereavement. A note to a widow or widower on his or her wedding anniversary, or a phone call on the birthday of the deceased will be appreciated. Don't worry that you will be bringing up the pain of the loss; they are well aware of their loss. Rather, your acknowledgement doesn't just recognize the death, it reaffirms that a life was lived.