

we will
never
forget
you

rest in
peace

How to Die on Facebook



miss
you

I'm
sorry
for your
loss



When someone you love passes away, does his or her profile live on? Three stories of facing death in the digital age.

BY ALISON CAPORIMO

Before we all plugged in and logged on, news of a loved one's death traveled from one person to another. The passing was memorialized in a church or temple, sobbed over at a graveside, or suffered in silence. Today, texts and e-mails share the story. And social networks offer many more people the opportunity to both honor and grieve the departed. Facebook is the new funeral.

"With a funeral, there is a specific time and place for people to mourn," says Jed Brubaker, a University of California, Irvine, social media scholar. "On Facebook, anyone at any time can engage in this process."

Some experts suggest that these electronic elegies impersonalize grief, even trivialize death. Likewise, some families choose not to keep their loved one's memory alive online. Others, though, find that social networks help with sharing memories, offering and receiving emotional support, and even raising funds for the bereaved.

The following experiences reveal the complexities of grief and the power of social networks to alter how we commemorate our dead.

ILLUSTRATION BY YVETTA FEDOROVA



I Feel Like I Can Still Talk to My Mom

BOLIVIA WILLIAMS

I WAS THE ONLY person in my family who was Facebook friends with my mom, Rynn, when she died four years ago. At the time, my brother and sister were too young to have accounts. As soon as we got the news that she had committed suicide, I posted on Facebook, “RIP Mom ...” I immediately felt a kind of release.

I thought it would be an easy way to let everyone know what had happened. Right after I published the status, so many people offered their support and shared stories about her, some of which I had never heard before. In that moment, the circle of people that I could rely on grew.

I like to visit my mom’s profile to tell her things that I’m doing and to look at her pictures and at ones that other people post of her. I sing with the Brooklyn Youth Chorus, and we did a concert for the tenth anniversary of 9/11, which was also my mom’s birthday. It was a really emotional day. I posted, “You’d be proud of me—I’m singing at the site



Bolivia, right, and her mother in July 2009

of the World Trade Center tomorrow. I know you will be looking down, smiling.” When I’m writing to her, it feels like I’m still in contact with her.

In the beginning, I wasn’t sure how to deal with her death. But I’ve grown and healed. I haven’t been on my mom’s page in seven or eight months, but I would miss it if it were gone.

Her profile is concrete proof that my mom existed.

In some sense, her profile allows me to think that she’s still here, which can be comforting at times. Facebook has a way of doing that. It creates a middle ground between being alive and being dead.

I used to go on my mom’s profile a lot after she died to look at her pictures, which would make me feel really sad. Now, when I visit it, I smile more often than cry.

Williams, 17, is a student at Bard College. She lives in New York City.

TO KEEP A PROFILE ACTIVE

If you leave a deceased person’s Facebook profile alone, it will continue to pop up as Someone You May Know and in other suggestion boxes. Memorializing the page removes old status updates and allows only friends to see the profile or locate it through a search. To memorialize a page, type “special request for deceased person’s account” into the Facebook search bar and follow the directions.

I Deleted My Wife's Profile

LEVI WILLIAMS



Levi and Lori Williams in 2010. “I don’t want a clone of her online,” says Levi.

ELEVEN DAYS AFTER my wife, Lori, gave birth to our daughter, Lily, Lori died from an infection that had spread from the C-section incision to her heart. It was March 9, 2012. Lori had been up most of the night with severe chest pains. We had just spent six days at home learning how to take care of our newborn. At 4 a.m., I called 911 and put Lori in the ambulance. She passed away before they made it to the hospital parking lot.

As Lily and I waited at the hospital for my family to pick us up, I was looking at my phone and noticed

friends were already commenting about Lori’s death on her Facebook page: “I can’t believe it” and “I miss you already” were the most common. It was really disturbing. I wanted to delete the page then and there, but I had forgotten her password.

When we got home, the first thing I did was to get on her computer—which was still logged in to her Facebook account—and delete the page. It just felt like the right thing to do. She was really into Facebook and other social media. It was so her. I felt like if she wasn’t there, it shouldn’t be there either.

I also felt so helpless about Lori’s death. I didn’t want to stand by while other people took over her page with their comments and pictures—I wanted to have some control.

After I deleted it, I checked in with her family. I don’t know if they were placating me or if they just didn’t have enough of a Facebook presence to care, but they said they hadn’t wanted to see it either.

Lori and I met in college in Mississippi and got married in 2003. In all, we were together for 15 years. But she is gone, and I think she would have wanted the page removed. I have her journals and pictures of her to show to Lily, so I don’t think Lily needs to see a Facebook page to know her mother.

I post a ton of pictures of our daughter on my Facebook page, and I have some online acquaintances who don’t know what happened to Lori. They’ll comment on a photo and ask how we are doing, and I’ll respond with my cell phone number and ask

them to call me. It takes a single post, one small second, and all of a sudden it's March 9 again.

People handle grief differently. Some people will hold on to a loved one's possessions for 20 years. For me, I couldn't sleep in my bed the night of her death without changing the sheets.

Deleting her Facebook page was the first step in my grieving process—it was a way of starting to let her go.

The one regret I have about taking down Lori's page is that her photos were deleted from the online world. Lori loved photography. I still have the pictures on her computer, but sometimes I feel guilty that other people can't see them. But if I had to go back and relive that moment, I'd delete the page all over again.

Williams, 34, is a teacher. He lives in Jackson, Mississippi.

TO DELETE A PROFILE

Log on to your loved one's Facebook account using his or her password—without the password, you can't delete the page. Type "delete my account" into the search bar at the top of the page. On the Delete Account page, click Delete My Account to permanently erase the page, including all posts, photos, and status updates.

To download the contents of the account before deleting the profile, click the Settings button at the top right of the page and select Account Settings. Click General, then Download a Copy of Your Facebook Data, and Start My Archive.

Creating My Best Friend's Memorial Page Has Helped Me Heal

JASON LAMBERT



Jason Lambert, left, with Sean Misner on Misner's wedding day in 2012

THE MORNING after I got the news that my best friend, Sean Misner, was one of the firefighters who died in an Arizona wildfire in June, I created a memorial Facebook page in his honor.

Sean and I were like brothers. We met playing Little League baseball when we were eight years old. Then he started going to the church I went to. We went through life's ups and downs together. My parents got divorced when Sean and I were in high school. We would just walk and talk

COURTESY JASON LAMBERT

it out. I got into Auburn University, and he moved to Alabama with me, just for the heck of it. He was 26 when he died.

I was in shock when I found out. Friends of his posted photos and information about vigils on his memorial page, and I set up a way for people to donate money to Sean's wife, Amanda, and their unborn son, right through the Facebook account.

My sister is a journalist, and she suggested that we set everything up quickly while the fire was getting national attention. In the first couple of days, Sean's memorial page got 2,000 likes. Today, it has more than 27,000 likes, each one representing someone who knew who my best friend was, one more person who was proud of him.

When Sean's family drove his ashes 500 miles from Prescott, Arizona, to his home in Santa Ynez, California, firefighters and other service members stood on every highway overpass, saluting. I used a picture of one overpass as the cover photo for Sean's memorial page. It has gotten more than a million views.

I was surprised at how much it comforted me to see that other people cared. Strangers were sending Facebook messages offering baby cribs and clothes to Amanda, and we've raised about \$10,000 for his son's education. One post was from a little boy in Nevada who said that after hearing about Sean, he wants to be a firefighter when he grows up. It really touched me. People post about what a hero Sean was, and

they're right. There's a lot of love on that Facebook page. A big motivating factor for me is that one day, when Sean's son, Sean Jaxon, is old enough, he can visit the page and see how respected his father was.

When I have moments of missing Sean, I visit the page, and it makes me smile. On my birthday or his birthday or some special occasion, I'll read the messages and look at the photos that people have posted. It's a way for me to keep his memory alive.

I'm getting married soon, and I know I will visit Sean's memorial page on my wedding day. Even though he's not here, it's my way of checking in with him. ■

Lambert, 26, is a financial adviser at Morgan Stanley. He lives in Santa Ynez, California.

TO CREATE A MEMORIAL PAGE

Sign in to Facebook and click **Create a Group**. Type in a name for the memorial page you want to create. Set the privacy settings to open (anyone can see the group, its members, and all posts), closed (anyone can see the group and its members, but only members can see posts), or secret (only members can see the group, other members, and any posts). Click **Create**.

To add a donation button to your memorial page, search for "donation button creator" on Facebook. Type in the name of your charity or individual, and click **Install on Facebook Page** and then **Add Donation Button Creator**.