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Cents and Sentiments

Ellen C. Wells



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So, I bought a sympathy card the other day.

Before I get too far along with the above story, I'll provide a little bit of background. I inherited a valuable trait from my mother (whom I know is reading this): Never spend an exorbitant amount of money on a greeting card. Just don't do it. Why? Well, because it's not about the sparklies or fancy font or funny punch line or someone else's heart-tugging words. The receiver of said card is appreciative enough of your effort to find a card, write something in your own words and spend the 50 cents* on a first-class U.S. postage stamp, not to mention walking it to the mailbox. The rest of the extras one finds on and in cards today—the fancy pop-up clown, the artwork worthy enough to be framed, the music!—well, those are extra dollars that can be put to good use elsewhere.

When I am shopping for cards (except holiday cards, which fall under the completely separate category of “boxed cards”) I have been trained by both my mother and my early low-income adulthood to head straight to the 99¢ section of the greeting card display. You can find some pretty nice cards there. It's not like they are missing a back or are written only in courier font. They are simple and straightforward: Perhaps a bright yellow front with an illustration of a red balloon and words like “Hooray! Have a happy birthday!” inside. No glitter needed.

Let's say I find that very card at my local Stop & Shop supermarket and somehow I have a coupon for 50¢ off a purchase of five cards. And then I send the card to my mother. Here's what a typical phone conversation afterward sounds like:

Mom: “Thank you for the card!”

Me: “I'm glad you liked it. You'll be even more glad to know I got it for 99¢ plus I had a coupon for 50¢ off five cards.” I say this with much anticipation of winning my Mom's approval of my purchase.

Mom: “I went to Walmart the other day and bought five cards for 99¢”

—*Inserted deflated face emoji here.*—

After reading the cards she receives and before placing them on the shelf for sentimental display, Mom quietly flips the card to its rear to find its price. A price she believes to be acceptable elicits no response. A price beyond imagine

(say, \$2) draws out a murmur of “Geesh, can you believe he spent that much?”

“He” is likely one of my brothers. Having never really shopped with my mother when they were young and therefore not having been influenced by her shopping habits, at least two of my three brothers spare no expense on cards. The cards arrive with frilly fonts, sappy sayings—even lace, vellum and multiple pages! There may even have been confetti that fell out of one a few years back. Come on, bro, what were you thinking? Now Mom has to get out the dustpan.

Back to my sympathy card purchase ...

The card is simple. It has a watercolor painting of what appears to be a white dogwood against a deep blue sky. I can’t recall the exact words, but there are only a handful and are presented in a simple font. And there’s plenty of whitespace inside, under the “ ... with condolences,” for me to express my particular sympathies.

As I was adding my sentiments to the card, I realized that at no point during my search did I turn over any of the cards to learn its price. I instead settled on a card that reflected both myself and also the woman who passed away. The item I chose wasn’t a product. It was a vehicle for the expression of my feelings toward someone who has gone and the husband who has been left behind.

In the world of commerce, there is room for both cents and sentiments. Sometimes you can even find them on the same shelf. **GP**

**That would be 50 cents as of August 2018. Who knows how much it will be next month!*