

On Facebook, 'friend' sometimes really means friend

Lea Goehring and I have never met, but we are friends. You know what I mean: Facebook friends.

When I joined Facebook two years ago, my attitude toward the social media site was one of considerable caution.

In a sense, it was like a new neighbor had just moved in across the street. I wanted to be cordial and all, but I also like my privacy. That changed on June 2 of this year — the day Lea Goehring's husband died.

Dale Goehring was just 45 years old. The father of two teenagers, he died in his sleep from a previously undiagnosed case of heart disease. In other words, there was no warning.

To my surprise, Lea reached out immediately and shared this painful moment with everyone who follows her on Facebook, myself included.

"Tonight I raise my glass," the Green Bay woman wrote, "to toast and say goodbye to my best friend."

Although I still regarded Lea as a "stranger," I immediately felt her loss. I also felt like I should acknowledge her somehow. I waited a few days and chose my words carefully. I wanted to be supportive and encouraging without sounding — you know — creepy.

My message to her went like this: "Life goes on, friend. You'll get through this. He would want you to."

Extraordinary creation, this Internet. We post things that,



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Dale and Lea Goehring

under different circumstances, we would never say out loud to someone sitting next to us in a bar or standing in line at the grocery store.

Sometimes, that unusual candor on Facebook gets people into trouble. But most times, it simply leads to healthy human interaction.

In the weeks that followed Dale's death, Lea Goehring continued to share her journey of grief and recovery with me and her other friends. Whether she was rearranging the house, helping her teenagers or navigating another flood of memories, we took every step together.

"I shed quite a few tears," she posted after visiting a place that reminded her of Dale.

"I can do this," she said when it came time to start her first school year as a single parent.

And on what would have been her 19th wedding anniver-

sary with Dale, she wrote poignantly, "Happy anniversary, my sweet."

It has been a little uncomfortable reading such intensely personal feelings from someone I never met. At times, it almost feels like I should look away and give her some privacy.

But Lea does not want us to look away. Making Facebook part of her grieving process has been intentional and purposeful.

First of all, she wants people to know the tragedy of what happened to Dale so they will have a deeper appreciation of how precious life is. She also finds comfort in hearing from friends. And she recognizes that her husband's death affected many people besides her and her children.

"When I share a story or a photo," she wrote me in an email, "then I know everyone is remembering Dale. And we grieve together."

Together.

That is what makes Facebook so powerful. It brings us together with people we might otherwise pass on the street without knowing how they could enrich our lives. Or how much they could teach us about the human condition.

Thanks, Lea. You are a good friend.

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