MEMORIALIZING LOVED ONES ON THE
WORLD WIDE WEB*

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ABSTRACT
Creating and visiting Web memorials represent new opportunities for post-
death ritual. A content analysis was conducted on a sample of 244 of the
memorials found on the largest Web Cemetery: Virtual Memorial Gardens
(catless.ncl.ac.uk/Obituary/memorial.html). Analyses revealed that memorials
were written, in descending order of prevalence, by children (33%), friends
(15%), grandchildren (11%), parents (10%), siblings (8%), spouses (4%), and
various other family members. This pattern favoring younger authors may
reflect the newness of this venue and facility with computer technology. The
content of such memorials often contained reference to missing the deceased,
rarely spoke of the cause of death, or made mention of God or religion.
Memorials were more likely to be written to the deceased (e.g., in the form of a
letter) rather than about or for the deceased (e.g., eulogy/obituary or tribute).
Parents, family groups, and other relatives more frequently made religious
references in their memorials than did other authors. In addition to the Web as
a novel, untapped data source, these memorials offer intriguing opportunities
for theoretical refinement (i.e., the ongoing connection between the bereaved
and the deceased).

*An earlier version of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the Geronotological

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INTRODUCTION

The industrial and social revolutions of the early 20th century introduced radical changes into the ways in which individuals both live and die (e.g., Charmaz, 1980; Walter, 1996). Paramount among these latter changes in particular are the objectification of illness, the perspective on death as failure, and the ultimate medicalization of life’s end (Bouvard, 1988) which naturally extend into the ways in which individuals mourn and grieve. That is, individuals now turn to medical professionals to define what normal grief is, replacing previous community norms (Parkes, 1972), and psychiatric care may be recommended for those who fail to contain their grieving within the restrictions of time and kinship ties (Haney, Leimer, & Lowery, 1997). Even the bureaucracies of individual work lives dictate legitimate bereavement time (Stein & Winokuer, 1989). The public expression of grief is limited to the contracted few days.

This institutionalization of death has left it hidden behind hospital or nursing home walls and has rendered grief freakish and the supporters of those who grieve inept. Mourning has become morbid and memorialization has not been encouraged (Bouvard, 1988; Cable, 1998). The “problem” of grief became a private problem of the individual, not the community (Charmaz, 1980). Consequently, death has become deritualized, reflecting “the increasing irrelevance of the dead in contemporary society, that is, the death of no one person disrupts the smooth functioning of society as it does in small village societies” (Kamerman, 1988, p. 87).

But even in urban, contemporary, 21st century North America, the dead are not irrelevant and grief struggles to find its voice and to find its place in individual lives. It is this voice of the bereft and this 21st century place of the relevant dead that are the subject of this research describing memorials on the World Wide Web (WWW): the postmodern opportunity for ritual and remembrance.

Conceptual Background

Death ends a life—it does not necessarily end a relationship (Anderson, 1974). This challenge to the linear, “detached” models of grief and bereavement has only recently been endorsed in the literature (Moss, Resch, & Moss, 1997; Silverman & Klass, 1996). The premise of this emergent theory of continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996) is that it is possible for individuals to sustain with the deceased a lasting, personal relationship that affects the course of their daily lives. According to Mulkay (1993), the deceased can be experienced and addressed symbolically by the living and they can influence the conduct of the living. In this respect, “the dead may continue to participate in the observable social world as that world that is understood by their survivors” (Mulkay, 1993, p. 33).

Lagging behind this more inclusive and ongoing view of the deceased in the lives of the bereft are the few places in which this interaction and these emotions
can manifest. Charmaz (1980) claims that Americans feel uncomfortable about displaying any strong feelings, grief among them, in the presence of others. Communicating with the deceased is greeted with suspicion. Speaking to the bereaved is uncomfortable; there is a lack of knowledge of what to say to them (Cable, 1998; Zunin & Zunin, 1991) and social clumsiness characterizes their interactions. Stoicism is admired and encouraged. Moreover, it is generally expected by many caring professionals and friends alike that, within one calendar year or less, the bereft will be “over” the loss and will return to “normal” levels of functioning (e.g., Stroebe, Hansson, & Stroebe, 1993; Wortman & Silver, 1987). In this context and as a consequence of deritualization (Rosenblatt, 1976) uncertainty reigns: Americans are less likely to know what to do when bereaved.

There are unwritten but familiar rules, however, about who is entitled to grieve. Pine (1989, p. 13), for example, claimed that in “compartmentalized society, funerals tend to be limited primarily to the ‘proper’ bereaved people. This has helped to create an underclass of grievers whose legitimacy may not even be recognized and whose needs are not addressed.” Doka (1989) identified these individuals as disenfranchised grievers—those whose grief occurs in relationships with no recognizable kin ties; those whose loss is not socially defined as significant; and those who are perceived to be incapable of grief (e.g., young children, very old adults, mentally-disabled persons). Doka (1989) also describes disenfranchised death as those that are socially unsanctioned and perhaps shameful (e.g., AIDS, suicide). The person who died is thought to be complicit in his or her own death and therefore unworthy of being mourned. As relationships become more complex, the likelihood of disenfranchised grief and disenfranchised death increases.

**Postmodern Rituals**

Concomitant with this increasing likelihood of disenfranchisement is the expanded search on the part of the bereft for an inclusive, accessible place to grieve. Traditional memories for the deceased include graves and urns, obituaries, and perhaps statues for famous persons. However, given the geographic mobility of the North American population, the bereft are often separated by expansive distances that are frequently expensive to navigate making the visiting of remains difficult. Cremation and the scattering of ashes may mean that there is no physical place to grieve. Obituaries chronicling the life of the deceased tend to be restricted for those who have been deemed, by the newspaper, as newsworthy in some way. “Ordinary” persons who have died are identified by time-sensitive death notices that typically consist of little more than a list of survivors, funeral or memorial service time and place, and information about contributions, although the more recent *In Memoriam* sections of newspapers offer an exception to this. Further, as Worden (1991) noted, traditional funerals occur during the
initial state of bereavement and hence there may be need for further postdeath rituals in order to adapt to the change in the life of the bereaved.

Out of this uncertainty and confusion and searching, new rituals are emerging that augment traditional forms which may no longer have meaning for grievers in sanctioned roles, that include grievers not sanctioned by formal rituals, and that address the need for further postdeath ritual.

If the formalism of more traditional rituals is perceived as failing to capture the distinct meaning of individual life or the extent of loss felt by survivors, those survivors may be more likely to alter and customize standard ritual practices to inject personal meaning. In the process, death may take on a collage of meaning and opportunities, which could result in new social patterns (Haney et al., 1997, p. 168).

New social patterns include the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt in which representations of those individuals who have died of HIV-disease are stitched together into a larger whole. The quilt allows for the expression of grief, both individually and as part of a larger community of loss (Corless, 1995). The quilt has provided the opportunity for hundreds of thousands of bereaved persons to share their very personal grief in a very public way.

Spontaneous memorialization, another emerging postdeath ritual, is a public response to unanticipated violent deaths (Haney et al., 1997). Identification with others is often due to the social vulnerability or anger felt by unexpected violent deaths. The memorials consist of symbolic mementos (e.g., letters, flowers, pictures of the deceased, stuffed animals) brought to the site of the death or a site associated with the death. By participation, the individuals create a role for themselves as mourners and extend the boundaries of who is allowed or expected to participate in the mourning process. Examples of spontaneous memorials include the tributes following the deaths of Princess Diana, John F. Kennedy, Jr., and the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing of the federal building and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

In this same context, many individuals have turned to cyberspace to seek new opportunities to express their grief, commemorate the deceased, create and find community. Web cemeteries (Roberts, 1999) provide a place to honor the deceased with few restrictions on length or format, unlike obituaries. Moreover, Web memorials may be introduced by anyone at anytime from anywhere, unlike land cemeteries. Thus, Web memorials are a low cost and easy access opportunity to commemorate the deceased. In addition, Roberts (1999) noted that creating and visiting Web memorials adhere to Kollar’s (1989) four steps of effective postdeath rituals: entering into a special time or place, engaging in a symbolic core act, allowing time to absorb what has occurred and is occurring, and taking leave. Web memorials also enable the positive postdeath ritual of writing; Lattanzi and Hale (1985) found that writing to or about the deceased assisted in the expression of emotion and sharing of perspective.
Cemeteries in Cyberspace: An Empirical Review

The review of research in the area of Web memorials is made necessarily brief by its recent history and modest empirical base. A couple of research studies have been published, although this special issue provides the broadest base of studies to date. Roberts and Vidal (2000) have conducted the most comprehensive study published thus far. They “toured” the Web cemeteries and characterized the memorials on three: Garden of Remembrance, World Wide Cemetery, and Dearly Departed. They found that the typical memorial was to a mid-life male. The typical author was a child, although authors also included, in large proportion, parents and friends. The majority of memorials were written to a, presumably, community audience, although over one-quarter were addressed to the deceased. A standard obituary-style was infrequently found. Although there are few constraints on form or content of memorial, several differences were noted between the cemeteries studied suggesting that each cemetery creates its own tradition or climate (Roberts & Vidal, 2000).

A second study by Roberts and colleagues (i.e., Roberts, Williamson, & Clemens, 1998) examined memorials created by individuals for deceased companion animals in comparison with those created for deceased humans. In this study, they drew memorials from Virtual Memorial Gardens, the site explored in the present study. Several interesting findings were noted. For example, although most memorials are written by a single person, a significantly greater number of companion animal memorials list multiple authors. Surprisingly, length of memorials did not differ between those for animals and those for humans. For both groups, approximately one-half of the memorials had some direct message to the deceased (rendering the memorials more similar to personal letters than obituaries). In fact, few of the memorials had qualities of standard obituaries, favoring instead narratives about the deceased. Poignantly, many of the companion animal memorials listed the death of previous animals and the presence of current animals along with statements that the deceased pets could either be with animals that had gone before or watch over those currently living.

The Present Study

In the context of deritualization and the search for new rituals and ways of memorializing the deceased and in the context of the omnipresent electronic revolution and the digital information superhighway now navigated by an estimated 260 million people worldwide (Vota & de Vries, 2001), this study explores memorialization of deceased loved ones on the World Wide Web. This descriptive study is intended as a characterization of these memorials: who writes these memorials and about whom are they written? What forms do these memorials take and what themes are contained therein? The sample for this study, the memorials themselves, derives from the largest memorial site on the World Wide Web: Virtual Memorial Garden (VMG).
METHOD

Sample

Virtual Memorial Garden (VMG) contains over 6700 memorials to people and over 4000 memorials to pets. It is free of charge. The memorials are provided to all who request them and are text based. They are listed alphabetically by last name, with the name listed first followed by the dates of birth and death underneath. The text of the memorial follows beneath the dates. A red ribbon is displayed near the memorial if the person died of AIDS. A bronze ribbon is in the upper left corner of the memorial. By activating the cursor on the button, messages may be left to the author in the Visitor’s Book about the particular tribute. Typically, depending on length, there are several tributes on each page.

The sample for analyses consists of a randomly selected 5% of the memorials to people in the Virtual Memorial Garden as of September 1999. Exceptions to this random inclusion were the following criteria: a minimum of three selections was made for each letter, and as such, there was an over-sampling of the letter (so as not to systematically exclude letter-related characteristics which may include ethnicity, for example). Also excluded from the sample selection were memorials made to groups of people, such as “all of the People Who died from AIDS,” famous persons, such as Selena, Princess Diana, and Jerry Garcia, listings of names and dates only (John Doe 1923-1996), memorials in foreign languages, and large groups of members from one family, as if the author recorded a family tree. The total sample size is 244 memorials.

All quotations are verbatim and therefore include punctuation, sentence structure, spelling and capitalization present in the original. Names have been deleted and punctuation and spelling appear as in the original Web memorial.

Measures

All of the variables included in analyses were derived from content coding. The demographic variables considered are:

- **Gender of deceased.** In all instances, it was possible to determine the gender of the deceased. Most entries were obviously male or female by the gender specific first name. A few that had names that were ambiguous for gender could be determined by reference to gender in the content of the memorial, such as “My favorite Aunt.”

- **Age of deceased.** Birth and death dates are very frequently listed in the memorials and only in the cases where these were omitted could age of the deceased not be determined. In those four cases in which such dates were not listed, age could be approximated from the content of the memorial.

- **Gender of author.** As was the case above with gender of deceased, name or reference to gender was determined in the content of the memorial, such as:
“She was the mother of my husband.” Not infrequently (i.e., in 25.5% of the cases), combined gender groups were identified as memorial authors, such as “love, Mother, Father, Sister, and Brother.” In examples such as this, a code was given representing authorship by both women and men. In 37% of the cases, gender could not be reliably determined and these data were thus excluded from relevant analyses.

Relationship to deceased. The author’s relationship to the deceased was fairly evident in the content of the memorial and included various family statuses (i.e., parent, spouse, child, grandchild, sibling, and other relatives), friends, and groups of family members (coded as family group). In 15% of the cases, the relationship could not be determined in the content of the memorial and these data were excluded from relevant analyses.

Length of entry. This was coded simply as the number of typed lines as shown in the memorial. One line was counted as approximately 20 words.

Themes for content analysis were also developed from our repeated readings of these memorials and influenced by the work of Roberts and Vidal (2000). The themes coded included:

- Expression of sadness over the death or missing the deceased. These expressions were readily coded. Examples of such codes include:
  
  “Mommy loves you and misses you so much.”
  “It has been 26 years since you were taken from us, yet the pain is still there.”

- Cause of death. As above, these codes were easily accessed and examples include:
  
  “He fought cancer for 9 years and lost the final battle.”
  “The girl who killed you leads a good life.”
  “Our mother was taken away by a crazed neighborhood boy.”

- Reference to God. Religious references were fairly strictly interpreted as mention of God. Examples include:
  
  “My Grandmother loved God more than life itself.”
  “...we celebrate the passing of this soul in God’s hands.”

Excluded from such codes were references to “heaven” or “angels” or even God as used in a poem or as popular sentiment. For example, a statement such as “this is for my sweet angel” was not coded in this category.

- Watching over the activities of the living. This code represents suggestions that the deceased is watching over the activities of the living. Examples include:
  
  “Keep watching over us.”
  “I hope I make you proud as you watch over me.”

- Reunion. This code represents comments of the authors that there will be a reunion of the bereaved and the deceased when the bereaved is dead. Examples include:
“Can’t wait to see you again.”
“I know you are with Grandma now.”

Codes were also developed to represent the types of memorials that were present. Several types were found and they are:

• **Letter to the Deceased.** Such a memorial is in the form of a letter similar to the *In Memoriam* newspaper section of obituaries, death notices, and funeral notices. Such letters occasionally included informing the deceased of new events (or updates) that have occurred in the lives of the bereaved; such updates occurred in 4.5% of the letters. Examples of this category include:
  “My dear baby girl, I have missed you so much . . .”
  “Dad, I hope that you are no longer suffering and that you and Mom are getting reacquainted.”
  “I am a mother and grandmother now. Your granddaughter has your dimples.”
  “I have done well in life and have 3 grandchildren.”

• **Eulogy/Obituary.** In this category, the memorial is about the deceased. This category includes stories, actual obituaries (found in only 2% of the memorials), and mention of personal qualities of the deceased such as “kind,” “humorous,” “helpful,” “teacher,” or “inspiring.” Examples of this category include:
  “. . . died Friday, February 14, 1992 . . . an apparent homicide . . .”
  “I was so proud of you when you became an r.n.”
  “As time went by and his dementia increased so too did the erudite clutter of his apartment.”
  “He was born in Phoenix, and was a Air Force veteran. Survivors include his four brothers and three sisters.”

Initially a separate category of personal qualities was also coded, but subsequent analyses revealed that this category was completely embedded in the eulogy/obituary category and hence the category of personal qualities is not discussed in this article.

• **Tribute.** This memorial includes tributes such as poems or sentiments similar to those found on gravestones. Also included are expressions of feelings by the author(s) about the deceased person or the death. Memorials expressing the inspiration that the deceased gave to the author were found in about 4% of the sample. Parents often expressed finding inspiration in the death to further causes for medical cures or to help other parents in similar situations. Examples include:
  “Now she sings so sweetly in Heaven’s Angel Band.”
  “Because of her I will dedicate my life to helping people grieve and understand this kind of situation. It is my way of healing and my gift to her.”

Other themes were initially coded and/or considered but were ultimately not included because they were found in so few cases. Guilt, for example, was
expressed in approximately 5% of the sample and was often a theme in the memorials of siblings. Gratitude that the pain was over was expressed in less than 5% of the sample and was usually found in memorials of persons who had suffered long illnesses. Similar, and often along with the gratitude that the pain was over, was the expression of gratitude that the deceased had found peace; this was present in 4% of the sample. Peace for the deceased was a common theme of memorials for persons who had committed suicide or had died from substance abuse, intentionally or unintentionally. Anger over the death, which was usually found in memorials about violent deaths, was found in about 2.5% of the sample.

Coding
All materials were coded by both authors who also developed the codes through multiple joint readings of memorial texts. Following these initial readings and discussions, which resulted in coding criteria, both authors independently coded a subsample (20%) of memorials to determine reliability. Once reliability (defined as greater than 80% agreement) was established, the second author coded the remainder of the memorials with repeated reliability spot checks. The final codes represent the negotiated settlements of both authors when discrepancies (which were rare) arose.

RESULTS

Who Writes Memorials?
Overall, of this random sample of memorials for which gender of author could be determined, 34% were female, 13% male, and 16% were written by a group of individuals known to comprise both males and females. As mentioned above, 37% of the memorials could not be identified by the gender of the author.

The relationship of these authors to the deceased is given in Figure 1; the vast majority of authors are children of the deceased. Friends were also frequent authors, as were family groups, grandchildren, and parents.

For Whom Are Memorials Written?
Overall, memorials were written for men in greater proportion than for women with respective percentages of 57 and 43; $\chi^2(1) = 4.738, p < .05$. The ages of the deceased ranged between birth and 99 years old with 48.5 as the mean. The inverse of the relationship graph presented in Figure 1 is relevant here. The majority of memorials were written for deceased parents. Friends were frequently memorialized as was a member of the family (by a family group of authors). Grandparents, children, and siblings were also memorialized; other relatives and spouses were least frequently memorialized.
What is Presented in the Memorials?

Letters to the deceased were written in over one-half (i.e., 55.7%) of the sample. Eulogies/obituaries comprised a comparable percentage (53.3%). Tributes made up 17.6% of the sample.

Most authors expressed Sadness/Missing the deceased (62.3% of the sample). Expectation of a Reunion with the deceased was expressed in 20.5% of the sample. Religious belief was included in 15.2% of the sample. Cause of Death was included in 14.8% of the sample. The belief that the deceased was watching over the bereft was mentioned by 11.1% of the sample.

How do Memorials Vary by Demographic and Relationship Characteristics?

A series of chi-square analyses was conducted using gender of the deceased as the independent variable and the type of memorial (e.g., Letter, Eulogy/Obituary, and Tribute) as the dependent variables. No significant differences were found. A similar pattern of non-significance was found using gender of the deceased as the independent variable with analyses on the coded themes: sadness/missing,
cause of death, religious belief, watching over, and reunion. An independent sample t-test similarly revealed no gender of deceased differences in the length of the memorial.

With the gender of the author as a variable, several significant differences were uncovered. With type of memorial as the dependent variable, several significant gender of author differences were noted. Females were more likely to write Letters to the deceased than were either male or groups, $\chi^2(2) = 12.36$, $p < .005$. A significant chi-square also was found with the gender of author variable on the measure of Tributes, $\chi^2(2) = 18.763$, $p < .001$. Group authors were significantly more likely to write Tributes for the deceased than were either females or males. Tributes are in some ways less personal and individual and perhaps this is the underlying reason for its overrepresentation in groups of authors. Although not statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 5.22$, $p < .08$), group authors were similarly less likely to write Eulogies/obituaries about the deceased than were either female or male authors. Percentages are presented in Table 1.

Similarly, analyses on the themes revealed several significant differences. Group authors were more likely than female or male authors to include references to Religious belief, $\chi^2(2) = 7.522$, $p < .05$. Female authors were more likely and group authors were least likely to include Reunion with the deceased, $\chi^2(2) = 7.711$, $p < .05$. There were no significant chi-square values testing the relationship of gender to Cause of Death, Missing/Sad, or Watching Over.

A chi-square analysis was conducted using gender of the author and relationship to the deceased as variables. A significant difference was uncovered between males and females in their relationship to the deceased, $\chi^2(2) = 112.413$, $p < .001$. Data are presented in Table 2. Females were more likely than males or mixed groups to write memorials as parents, children of the deceased, siblings, grandchildren, and other relatives. Males were more likely than females to write memorials as spouses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Percentages of Male, Female, and Group Authors and Memorial Types and Selected Thematic Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eulogy/obituary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reunion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A series of Chi-Square analyses was conducted using relationship to the deceased and type of memorial classification and thematic content as dependent variables. Relationship categories included: Parent, Spouse, Child, Grandchild, Sibling, Other Relative, Family Group, and Friend. Significant differences found on the classification variables are presented in Table 3. Information about the relationship was missing in 15% of the sample. Parents and Siblings are more likely to write Letters to the deceased, \( \chi^2(2) = 21.06, p < .005 \). Family Groups are significantly more likely to Tributes \( \chi^2(2) = 35.193, p < .001 \). Note that no Siblings and only one Grandchild wrote a Tribute for the deceased. Grandchildren were the most likely to write Eulogies/Obituaries about the deceased and Parent and Family Groups were the least likely, \( \chi^2(2) = 23.57, p < .005 \).

On the thematic codes, the only significantly different effect appeared with the Religious Belief variable, \( \chi^2(2) = 24.46, p < .005 \). Parents, Family Groups, and Other relatives were the most likely (40.0%, 33.0%, and 27.2%, respectively) and friends, siblings, and children (3.2%, 5.9%, and 8.6%, respectively) were the least likely to include reference to religious beliefs; 11.0% of spouses and 13.6% of grandchildren included reference to religious beliefs. Although chi-square values comparing relationships and Cause of Death were not significant in general, it is worth noting that no Spouses or Grandchildren included Cause of Death in their memorials.

Independent sample t-tests were conducted using as dependent measures, Age of the Deceased and the Length of Entry; independent variables were the type of memorial classifications and the coded themes. No Significant differences were found on the measure of Age of the Deceased for the classification
variable Letters, or for the coded themes of Sad/Missing, Watching Over, and Reunion. Significant differences were found on the remainder of the independent variables and they are reported below.

Tributes were written for deceased persons who were, on average, younger than those whose memorials were coded for something other than a Tribute (i.e. Eulogy/Obituary or letter); the mean ages were 40.05 and 50.28, respectively, \( t(238) = 2.282, p < .05 \). Eulogies/Obituaries were written about deceased persons who were, on average, older than those whose memorials were coded for something other than Eulogy/Obituary (i.e., Tribute or Letter); the mean ages were 52.96 and 43.20, respectively, \( t(238) = -2.847, p < .01 \). Memorials that included the Cause of Death were written for deceased persons who were on average, younger than those for whom no reference to Cause of Death was included in the memorial; the mean ages were 37.97 and 50.29, respectively, \( t(238) = 2.566, p < .05 \).

No significant differences were found on the measure of Length of Entry (number of lines) on the memorial classification Letters, or on the coded theme of Watching Over. Significant differences were found on the remainder of the independent variables and they are reported below.

Tributes written about the deceased were shorter than were Letters which, in turn, were shorter than Eulogies/obituaries, \( t(242) = 2.727, p < .01, t(242) = 4.368, p < .01, t(242) = 3.675, p < .01 \), respectively. The relevant mean line lengths for these three memorial types were 2.49, 3.02, and 6.85, respectively. Memorials that included themes such as Cause of Death, Religious Belief, Missing/sad, and Reunion were on average, longer than memorials that did not include this content (all \( t \)-values >2.3; all \( p \)-values < .05). Memorials with this content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Tribute</th>
<th>Eulogy/Obituary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>52.9</td>
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<td>Grandchild</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<td>Sibling</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>70.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other relative</td>
<td>36.3</td>
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<td>72.7</td>
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<td>Family group</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>29.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>48.3</td>
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</table>
averaged 8.6 lines whereas memorial without this content averaged just over 4 lines. Interestingly, memorials that listed Cause of Death or made reference to Religious Beliefs tended to be longer (averaging 10.5 lines) whereas those expressing the theme of Missing/sadness or Reunion tended to be shorter (averaging 4.1 lines).

One-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) were computed on the Length of Entry and Age of Deceased with relationship status as the independent variable. Analyses revealed no difference in Length of Entry; however, as expected, a significant difference was found for the Age of Deceased, $F(7, 202) = 35.454$, $p < .001$. The mean ages associated with these relationship differences appear in Table 4.

Post hoc tests (Scheffé, $p < .05$) revealed that Parents differed from all other relationship types; Spouses differed from both Parents and Grandchildren; Children differed from all except Spouse and Other Relatives; Grandchildren differed from all except Other Relatives; Siblings differed from Parents, Children, and Grandchildren; Other Relatives differed from Parent and Friends; Family groups differed from Parents, Children, and Grandchildren; and Friends differed from Parents, Children, Grandchildren, and Other Relatives.

### DISCUSSION

Memorializing on the World Wide Web is a new phenomena offering significant potential for the creation of new postdeath rituals. This study represents an attempt to characterize the memorials placed on this site, VMG, through an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Mean age of deceased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>9.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>42.78</td>
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<td>Child</td>
<td>62.46</td>
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<td>Grandchild</td>
<td>82.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>33.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relative</td>
<td>57.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family group</td>
<td>38.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>31.31</td>
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</tbody>
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identification of the authors, a description of the individuals for whom these memorials were written, and an analysis of their content. The discussion that follows is organized around these study goals and embeds in each section sources of variability.

Who Writes Memorials?

Women were the largest group of memorial authors, similar to the findings of Roberts and Vidal (2000). Socialization experiences that promote emotional expression, including grief, tend to be more characteristic of women than of men (Martin & Doka, 1998; Sanders, 1998). Historically, women wore the mourning attire and, according to Mulkay (1993), women were “enclosed within the ritual death sequences through which expression was given to the collective bereavement of their families.” Concomitantly, Walter (1994) suggests that men are less likely to use rituals, perhaps even electronic ones.

Group authorship was also frequently noted. As Roberts and Vidal (2000) reported, such collaborative expressions create novel opportunities for the development of new postdeath rituals, similar to the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The gender of authorship was indeterminate in over one-third of the memorials coded. This, of course, is unlike more traditional memorials and may mask some of the findings and interpretations suggested above.

Children of the deceased were the majority of authors. Perhaps this is an age-based, computer literacy (and, hence, cohort) effect. Alternatively, perhaps this reflects the search for an opportunity to express grief in a societal context in which the death of a parent is seen as expected, timely, fair, and less tragic (e.g., Moss & Moss, 1989). This interpretation of societal expectations of who grieves and the context that supports such grief is also relevant to the finding that friends comprised the second largest group of memorial authors. Friends are often disenfranchised from traditional grief and mourning rituals (e.g., Doka, 1989) and may find a valued and rare place to articulate their grief in cyberspace.

A similar comment might be offered for other disenfranchised grievers. For example, also included in the sample were three lovers, one co-worker, and one neighbor. Gay partners authored at least three memorials. The sample also included one ex-spouse, two past lovers, and five former friends. Memorials for miscarriages and stillbirths comprised 11 entries or about 4% of the sample.

Disenfranchised deaths were also noted. At least five people died of AIDS. Three memorials were for people who had committed suicide and at least two memorials were for people who had died from substance abuse. For example, the following memorial was written by the sister of a man who committed suicide by heroin overdose:

I just want to know why if you felt so unhappy with your life, why didn’t you call me? Me, the sister who always took you in when no one else would . . . it all seems so strange that the first time I ever told you I loved you was after
you were dead and laying before me in that casket... We all never knew where you were from one day to the next, if we had, we would have made an effort to find you. The big thing Im dealing with now is that im not so sure I would have tried to find you because of the last time we saw each other 2 years ago, you made me so angry, therfore I myself did not want to see or talk to you, if I had would you still be here?

**For Whom are Memorials Written?**

A greater proportion of memorials was written for deceased males than deceased females, similar again to the findings of Roberts and Vidal (2000) who comment that this finding may ultimately suggest the memorialization of untimely deaths, since more males than females die in their youth (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995). This interpretation is further supported by the relatively young average age of the deceased (48.5 years). This finding is also similar to those characterizing death notices (e.g., Kastenbaum, Peyton, & Kastenbaum, 1977) and obituaries (Maybury, 1996). Kastenbaum et al. (1977) have suggested that such unequal representation is a byproduct of societal sexism in which men are afforded opportunities for notoriety disproportionate to women. Unlike these more traditional memorials (and unlike the findings of Roberts and Vidal (2000) who used a somewhat more sensitive measure), however, the length of the memorials did not differ by gender.

**What is Presented in the Memorials?**

More than one-half of the memorials on the site used for these analyses assumed the form of a letter to the deceased. These are the most personal of the memorials and usually present significant emotional quality; perhaps this is associated with the greater likelihood of these memorials being authored by either parents or siblings. Not surprisingly, and for reasons suggested above, women authored most of these letters. Parents, the most frequent authors, expressed profound grief and often searched for meaning, especially in the case of newborn and infant deaths as seen in the following:

I cry everyday for us. For you, because you will never share life with your family, those who love you so much already. For us, because we will never see your smile or feel your tiny arms holding us close. I ask God everyday why he needs you. Why you cant grow up with your brothers who love and need you. Why our daddy has to feel such pain. Sometimes I wish you could stay inside me forever, so you could live and I could be with you my son. I am afraid everyday that once you leave me the loneliness will be more than I can bear. I fear the emptiness inside without you there and without you in my arms.

Letters to the deceased in the VMG are similar to the *In Memoriam* memorials in newspapers as described by Davies (1996). He characterizes *In Memoriam* as a
populist form of postdeath ritual in Britain, where the VMG is based. Letters may also reflect the continuing bonds of the living with the deceased (Silverman & Klass, 1996), an important aspect of this form of memorialization unavailable elsewhere. The inclusion of updates in some of the letters further supports this interpretation and assumes an active listener who keeps up with the day-to-day comings and goings of the living. The In Memoriam entries differ from the VMG in that they are generally much shorter (perhaps due to the cost per line) and tend to take the form of poems, frequently supplied by the newspaper.

The number of letter memorials uncovered in this study was almost twice as many as reported by Roberts and Vidal (2000). This may reflect the design differences in the sites used for study. For example, the Garden of Remembrance, the World Wide Cemetery, and Dearly Departed used in Roberts and Vidal (2000) appear somewhat more formal and may, as a result, solicit or suggest certain types of memorials. They have one or more inclusions such as graphics of gardens, music, pictures of the deceased, requests for birth and death locations, and a page for each individual memorialized. Possibly the VMG, with its text only, free of charge, and no restriction format support this more personal approach by the bereaved.

Eulogies/obituaries were included in slightly more than one half of the entries, comparable to the findings of Roberts and Vidal (2000). These memorials enabled the authors to tell stories and give examples to illustrate the character of the deceased and how he or she related to others. This type of information is more frequently represented in funerals, by speakers, or in personal memory books or diaries. In the VMG, the memorial can be submitted by anyone and the information is available in a public record.

Eulogies/obituaries tended to be longer than either letters or tributes, perhaps not surprising given that they contain narratives and descriptions frequently not found in these other memorial types. Grandchildren were the most likely authors of eulogies/obituaries and, relatedly, these were written for generally older persons. Grandchildren often told affectionate stories of their remembrances of the deceased and special qualities about their relationships with them. If the death of an older person is less tragic, as has been implied elsewhere, then perhaps the associated eulogy can assume a more celebratory perspective as opposed to a more mournful perspective. The following was written for a 90-year-old grandmother:

You gave me a perspective on life that was different from anyone else's. You taught me independence and self-worth. You made me realize that it doesn't take a man to make a woman's life complete. . . . You gave me the desire to travel and to appreciate nature. Somehow in the simplicity of your life, and the strength of your convictions, you caused me to question all things, and to look beyond for the true meaning. You also gave me the
appreciation of the simple thing in life. . . . Thank you for being so funny and stubborn.

Poignantly, the following was written by a grandson for his still-living grandmother:

Grandma, During WWII you waited as long as you could before leaving the family estate, but as the artillery shells began landing behind you, you knew it was time to go. Now I visit you at your board and care, and see the Alzheimer’s Disease steadily advancing. So much of you has already left. I feel I am the one holding the single suitcase, packed with what memories of the “whole you” I could grab: the long family dinners; the scent of the paints in your studio…you only began painting when you were sixty, but when we moved you out of your home there were hundreds of paintings; driving with you “Light turn green, I’m coming with my friends”; and your teaching me to drive. These days I take long drives just to have the space to think. When I finish this, I’m going to take one of those drives, and think of our lives and the confounding nature of this disease which allows us to be both together and apart.

The special bond between grandchildren and grandparents is remarkable and evident in these touching memorials. Tributes for the deceased consisted of less than one in five memorials. These are the most formal (i.e., somewhat less personal) of the memorials and were, concomitantly, written by in greater proportion by groups of authors. Tributes tended to include little information about the deceased and were shorter than both letters and eulogies. They were very similar to gravestone writings, such as:

The wind came out of the clouds by night and killing my beautiful darling wife.

A dear little baby who didn’t have a chance but is still remembered by his family.

Recall that themes coded in this study were Sadness/missing, Cause of death, Religious belief, Watching over, and Reunion with the deceased. Expressing sadness over the loss or mention of missing the deceased was frequently found in the memorials; such expressions are paradigmatic of grief reactions and expected.

Cause of death was infrequently included, unlike newspaper obituaries. When cause of death was listed, it was more likely to be included in the memorial for a younger person. Again, this may be associated with the perception that the death of a younger person is a greater tragedy. Cause of death was also more likely to be included if the death was sudden, as in the following example:
_____ died as the result of being hit by an arena truck while working for the show promoter. He was the second boy in our family to be killed by a truck. His brother, _____, was 8 years old when he was hit while crossing the road to get on a school bus. These traumatic deaths have made it very difficult for our family to come to some kind of resolution.

Religious belief was expressed in very few memorials. Perhaps this is a technology effect in that either people who use the World Wide Web are less religious than those who do not (itself, a provocative hypothesis) or that expressions of religious belief are inappropriate on the Web (i.e., suggestive of a Web-culture and similarly provocative). Group authors were more likely than either men or women to include religious belief, perhaps because these memorials tended to be more traditional, for reasons suggested above. Interestingly, parents were most likely and friends were least likely to include religious belief in their memorials, further suggestive of appropriate cultural scripts available for different “classes” of grievers.

Commenting that the deceased is “watching over” and claims of future reunions, were often used simultaneously, although not frequently. Similar to letters written to the deceased, these themes imply a continuing and active relationship with the deceased. Rosenblatt (1976) reported, in his study with 19th century diarists, that references to reunions in heaven addressed the goal of the writer to resume the relationship with the deceased. That women were more frequent authors of memorials including reunions and to write letters, support Mulkay’s (1993) claim that such behaviors serve “as a mechanism whereby the social existence of the deceased family members was extended” by the historical kinkeepers. Women were responsible for maintaining the bonds between family members in life and between the living and the dead through prayers, grave visits, and the continued celebrations of anniversaries (e.g., birthdays of the deceased).

Several memorials were written on anniversaries of births or the death or holidays. Other similar types of events also served as catalysts for writing, such as the following letter written by a 13-year-old girl to her father who had died three years prior. After various updates of family activities, she wrote:

Mom is gong to get married, and I hope that you don’t mind. You’ll always be my Daddy, and we all love you so much. You could never be replaced by anyone.

CONCLUSION

Web cemeteries, as an emerging postdeath ritual, celebrate private mourning in a public place. Web cemeteries offer unobtrusive access to very personal and private mourning ritual and are inclusive of all who have access to a computer. Web cemeteries borrow elements from traditional rituals and combine them
into meaningful personal expression. They build (electronic) community by transforming individual loss and expression to a social context. “Ours is an age that needs both the marking of known ways that are worthy of repetition and the groping for new ways in situations with scant precedent” (Driver, 1991, p. 50).

The memorials are extremely varied in content, purpose, and sentiment, yet reveal insights in the nature and scripts of grief and the ongoing tie between the deceased and the bereft. Much can be learned from such a venue about ritualizing, grief, and relationships.

REFERENCES


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