Western societies increasingly have been dismantling the boundaries that separate life and death (Howarth, 2000). Studies of grief have repeatedly found that life and death are not separate, and that normal grief need not and does not terminate continuing bonds with the deceased (see Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). The end of the life of a significant other is not the end of the relationship; rather the relationship persists, not frozen in time, but evolving with modifications of biographies of self and of the deceased. These articles suggest that the bonds between the living and the dead continue into the indefinite future, and that the dead as well as the living play an active part in that bond.

The four articles in this special issue focus on a new means that bereaved people have found to represent their continuing bonds with the deceased: not only by going to the physical cemetery; not only by keeping photographs and mementos at hand; not only by having continuing thoughts of and conversations with the deceased or seeking his or her guidance in life; not only by carrying out the legacy of the deceased, but by placing a memorial on a Web site on the World-Wide-Web.

A central theme in these articles is the wish and reality of holding on to the deceased, as well as letting go—of maintaining the tie while accepting that the person is dead. These memorials repeatedly acknowledge the continuity of attachment over time, rather than its ending. Maintaining a tie with a deceased loved one can be self-affirming and comforting, and the maintenance of the bond can be more freeing than its denial. The status of parent, child, grandchild, spouse continues as a part of one’s self, and to deny it may threaten the sense
of self. Marris (1974) has suggested that the fundamental crisis of bereavement
is not the loss of the other, but the loss of self. Frequent communication of the
positive characteristics of the deceased can be a way of accepting the loss while
affirming the meaning of the bond. This was a worthwhile person; I am the
better for having loved or cared for that person. To affirm the deceased other
can affirm the self.

Acknowledging a loss in daily life, from the habitual or meaningful interaction
with a person who has now died, could be considered as letting go, but the longed
for touch, daily routines, the favorite foods, music and world view of the deceased
can be missed. Missing what was once so cherished and meaningful can affirm the
past, and be carried into the future. The duration of the tie with the deceased is
demonstrated by the fact that many of the memorials were authored one or two
decades after the death.

Four key visual characteristics tend to define an English cemetery: The solid
enduring gravestone, the words on the stone, the intensity of feelings expressed
by those visiting the cemetery, and the imagery of nature (Francis, Kellaher, &
Neophytou, 2001). Each of these is present in some clear way in Web memorials,
often referred to as “Web cemeteries” They promise continuity, are text-based,
involve intense feelings, and use imagery of nature (note the Web site Virtual
Memorial Garden which was founded in Britain). Visits to both the traditional
cemetery and to the Web memorial are post death rituals symbolizing private
mourning in a public space.

A theme which persists throughout these article is that of enfranchising grief
that has not been socially sanctioned: for persons with AIDS, for newborn infants,
for old parents, for pets. It may be that most all bereaved persons experience some
feelings that their expression of grief for a loved one is disenfranchised. There
tends to be an acceptable period of time for a socially appropriate expression of
emotional upset about a loss, and when that period has passed it may be that
bereaved persons feel social pressure to reduce or eliminate the sharing of their
depth sadness. Web memorials tend to allow continuity of expression of grief,
offering unobtrusive access and thus facilitating enfranchisement of grief. It would
be interesting to ascertain whether the timing of the creation of Web memorials is
associated with a feeling of disenfranchised grief.

Roberts has explored the meaning of community for persons who enter the
memorials on the Web. She has reported that many memorials were developed by
a group of persons, that many are visited and revisited by many different people
(although almost half of the visitors reportedly did not know the deceased person),
that there is a feeling of connection with other bereaved persons when one goes to
the Web site. The memorial is a public place, and thus reference to anonymous
others (“whoever is reading this”) is not unusual. Web sites seem to offer a sense of
empathy and support in a community of similarly bereaved persons. The bereaved
person who set-up the Web memorial often reported that on-line friends were
considered more supportive than the people in their lives. We do not know the
degree to which the Web memorials supplement or substitute for a community of close personal ties off the Web.

In some ways the Web site may be similar to support groups in providing a place for persons with similar losses to interact and find comfort and understanding. However, a support group generally has a facilitator, meets at a prescribed time, and provides an arena for face-to-face interaction. We do not know the conditions that lead a person to create or return to Web memorials: Is it at a regular time? Is it in response to a disturbing memory or heightened feeling of intense loss? Do professionals who counsel the bereaved find that their clients go to (“visit”) these Web memorials?

There is a moral theme that emerges (particularly in Blando’s work on AIDS but also around accidental or violent deaths). In many situations, affirming the moral rightness of the death—to end intense pain and suffering—is coupled with affirming the moral wrongness of the cause of death.

Basic questions involving Web memorials remain to be answered. *What is the impact of creating and visiting a memorial website on the process of grief?* Does the Web memorial help a bereaved person take on some of the tasks of grief (Worden, 2002)? Is the meaning and impact of the Web site different for persons who have suffered different losses (e.g., various relationships, losses at different times in the life course, or expected vis-à-vis sudden deaths)? How does the meaning and the impact of the Web memorials differ for persons of different gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, and socio-economics groups? Does the geographic distance of the resting place of the deceased generate a wish for the apparent increased proximity on the Web? Does the impact and meaning of the Web memorial change over time? How universal is Blando et al.’s observation that “they are uploading grief and downloading compassion”?

*What have we learned and can we learn about grief and loss from the study of the memorials themselves?* The maintenance of the bond as discussed above is central. Further, the Web enables the bereaved to create and participate in a community of grievers. Considering the high salience of religion at the end of the 20th century, it is interesting that de Vries and Rutherford found that religious themes or references to God were relatively infrequent in their sizeable sample. The content of the memorials reflects the many processes of coping with bereavement, from expressing deep loss to (re)construction of the meaning of life after the death of a loved one (Stroebe & Schut, 2001). To what extent are persons who create or visit Web memorials experiencing complicated grief? The overlap of themes which have emerged from content analyses in the four articles clearly invite future efforts to integrate and conceptualize the bereavement reactions of those persons who created Web memorials and to examine them in light of bereavement theories.

*What can we learn about the quality of significant relationships between the living, when we examine the text of the memorials?* Each of the authors has found
that a significant proportion of the memorials were addressed directly to the deceased. That suggests the potential value of mining these communications to search more and more deeply for themes, and to see how they can help us to understand the meaning of different relationships and losses across the life course. For example, I found intriguing de Vries and Rutherford’s finding that guilt though rarely expressed was particularly salient in the often ambivalent relationship with siblings.

Nager hypothesized that the quality of child-parent attachment in adulthood would be associated with grief after the parent’s death. Although the limitations of sample size and a self-administered on-line questionnaire yielded few significant results, her theoretical approach and her focus on a particular group of bereaved persons (as did Scharlach, 1991) provides continuity in research. Her findings that themes of hyperbole and of self-reference differentiate daughters with secure vis-à-vis insecure parent ties raise issues for future exploration.

Web memorials are new venues in which the separate worlds of the living and the dead are integrated through memory and ritual. We can only speculate about Web memorials in the future. Currently, their creation appears to be a spontaneous, self-initiated activity, with little or no expectation by the now deceased person that would obligate the authors to write a memorial. Can we expect in the future that persons will write their own Web memorial before death? If so, will that change the meaning of the Web memorials for the deceased?

Whether and how Web memorials will continue to have an impact uniting the personal and public arenas of grief is to be seen. The future use of qualitative research with in-depth interviews may enable us to take further steps to understand the meanings of these memorials. Hopefully research will build upon these four articles as it seeks to throw additional light on the process of bereavement in the cyberspace of the 21st century.

REFERENCES


Direct reprint requests to:

Miriam Moss
Polisher Research Institute
Abramson Center for Jewish Life
8120 Brookside Road
Elkins Park, PA 19027