

Cremation, Burial and Memorials: The Options and Choices of Bereaved People

by

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EDITOR'S COMMENT

I remain as puzzled as I always have been by memorials. I suspect their main value is to reassure the bereaved of the dead person's importance. Death brings home the transience of life yet I do not want to think of my father-in-law as no more important than a blade of grass. So I am glad to know that there is a stone in Micheldean Church which is carved with his initials. This was his church and his name remains in much the same way that children carve their names on their school desks for fear of becoming anonymous. Memorials are not directed at the family (who will not forget) but at the rest of us (who will forget very soon if not reminded).

The bereaved need to create something very physical to fill the physical gap left by a dead person. A memorial is more than a kind of memo. It is a physical symbol of an internal object, an outward and visible sign of a being who cannot be any more, a foot stamped into the naked concrete of eternity.

I wax lyrical, but it is very hard to write intelligently about anything as preposterous as a memorial. How can a squared block of stone with a name on it represent a person? In this paper Frances Clegg reports the ordinary answers which she obtained to this extraordinary question and to the equally extraordinary question—how do you dispose of the dead body of a person you love?

Dr. Colin Murray Parkes, MD, FRCPsych

During 1987, Cruse branch leaders were asked whether local members might help with a research project into decisions made during bereavement. Sixty-two branches expressed an interest, and over the next few months 132 people from all over Britain completed questionnaires and sent them to me. The members who helped in this way were 120 women (of whom 110 were widows), and 12 men (of whom 10 were widowers).

I am grateful to all these bereaved people for participating, and for being prepared to disclose information which in some cases was clearly quite painful for them.

Choice of burial or cremation

The main topic of the research was the decisions which bereaved people have to make, and perhaps the most fundamental one concerns the choice of burial or cremation. Sixty-eight per cent of the respondents said that cremation had been chosen, and this corresponds very closely to the proportion of cremations carried out currently in this country as a whole.

Regardless of whether burial or cremation was chosen, for half of

the respondents this choice was the dead person's wish. Many couples had discussed the topic prior to the death, and so had arrived at a joint decision. The ownership of a family grave or the existence of a family tradition of burial seemed to be the main factor in a decision for burial with many people, whilst only one or two respondents mentioned religious reasons as a basis for this choice.

Regrets

Fortunately, 90 per cent of the respondents had no regrets about the choice of burial or cremation. However, six widows had some regrets following cremation, and another six widows described somewhat stronger feelings of regret following burial. These regrets occurred from within a few months of bereavement to as late as 20 years later. They concerned such things as the actual choice of burial or cremation, not knowing where someone's ashes lie, having no grave to visit, or being unable to visit the cemetery or crematorium grounds because of the distance involved.

The research has shown that for bereaved people, regrets can occur



at varying time periods following a loss, and that their nature can change with the passage of time. For instance one lady says that she has no regrets about cremation now, but a few years ago deeply regretted not having a grave to tend. It is clear that for some elderly people it may be quite a blessing in later years not to have to travel far to visit a grave, or worry about its upkeep. The air of neglect in some large and unkempt cemeteries, and in some cases an actual fear of visiting them, were mentioned by some respondents as good reasons for preferring cremation. No one in the survey criticised crematorium grounds for being untidy, and indeed several people spoke highly of some Gardens of Remembrance as being pleasant and comforting places.

The Desire for a Memorial

The next major area of interest on the questionnaire concerned memorialisation. Fourteen per cent of all the respondents were definitely against having a memorial, and a further nine per cent were either initially against the idea or uncertain, but went on to obtain some form of memorial. There was no difference between the choice of burial or cremation and subsequent wishes for a memorial, and this finding contrasts with the results of similar surveys in which memorials were more popular after burial than cremation.

Whilst a headstone was the most common choice of memorial following burial, a much greater variety of memorials was mentioned for cremation. An entry in the Book of Remembrance was most frequently cited (and probably the survey under-estimates the popularity of this form of memorialisation, for many people do not even think of it as a form of memorial), with headstone, rose, shrub, donation,

plaque, and seat also being mentioned several times each. Many respondents listed two, three and sometimes four chosen memorials. Sadly, for a few people, the preferred memorial could not be obtained for financial reasons. However, on the whole, wishes seem to have been satisfied.

Many reasons were given for wanting a memorial, and on average each person suggested either two or three. The most frequently named reasons were commemoration; the bereaved person's wish; having a point of contact; and as a help in grief. Respect and "for the benefit of future generations" were also mentioned a few times.

Memorials as a help in grief

Respondents were asked to say whether the chosen memorial had helped them—"No, not at all", "Not much", "Yes", or "Yes, a great deal". To simplify the data analysis, these four categories were collapsed into two, which then described whether a person thought the memorial had or had not been helpful. "No, not at all" and "not much" were combined into one category whilst "yes" and "yes, a great deal" made up the other category. Excluding those people who were unable to have the memorial of their choice, the results indicated that 79 per cent had felt helped by having their chosen memorial.

Is there a particular type of memorial which people find the most helpful? For this question, the results of this survey confirmed the findings of previous work. It is clear that no single type of memorial (e.g. a rose-bush or a headstone) carries outstanding therapeutic qualities. However, it seems that the perceived helpfulness of a particular memorial is related to its connection with the dead person. By this, I mean that if a memorial has been chosen to reflect some special aspect or memory of the deceased, then it is likely to be more comforting than one which has no connection with them other than marking the spot where the remains lie. Thus a rose-bush in a crematorium may be a very special and helpful memorial for someone who loved plants and gardens or else it may be a rather meaningless plant among hundreds of others. Similarly, an expensive headstone may simply mark the grave, or else it may be a most powerful and poignant link with the dead person, perhaps because of a specially worded inscription or symbol.

It is of considerable concern to me that in their efforts to keep cemetery maintenance costs to a minimum, many Local Authorities in the United Kingdom now greatly restrict the choice of permitted headstones. Indeed, in some lawn cemeteries, a traditional headstone may not be allowed at all. Misunderstandings about the restrictions on headstones are another cause for subsequent regret, and ideally this matter should be considered when a plot is being purchased, rather than after the burial or committal of ashes has taken place.

The results showed that satisfaction and help from a memorial are not particularly linked to cost. In other words, spending a lot of money on an expensive type of memorial is not going to guarantee that it is helpful. For instance many people felt greatly helped by memorials which cost them very little or nothing, for instance collecting donations which are then given to a chosen charity.

The decision not to have any tangible memorial, or no memorial near where the body or ashes are placed, can be successful but is probably more likely to succeed when it is the result of previous discussion and positive convictions. One aspect which seems to be commonly overlooked is that if the main mourner makes the decision not to have a large funeral, not to have flowers, or not to have a memorial, then he or she may also be denying many friends, relatives and acquaintances a chance to grieve and say goodbye. During my research I have been struck by how powerful and positive an effect the presence and support of many others can be. More than one person has said that she felt tremendously comforted by the big turnout for her husband's funeral, and that she benefited from this public statement of how much her husband was loved and valued by so many people. One widow, who was initially against having a memorial, was encouraged to do so by the number of people who expressed a desire for one. Not only was she surprised by how many people wished to pay respects to her husband, but also by the fact that she herself felt helped by the chosen memorial.

Memorials and memories

Many people believe that memories are the only true form of memorialisation, and they firmly

believe that their memories of the dead person are sufficient. For them, the lack of a tangible memorial may pose no problems, and in this survey none of the people in this category spoke of regretting this decision. However, every person is different, and the majority of respondents felt that some link with the dead person in the form of a memorial was helpful. Many people described how, with the passage of time, the importance of this physical link gradually diminished and was gradually replaced by memories. Perhaps, therefore, for most of us a memorial provides us with a temporary link with the deceased person during the extremely painful "letting go" period. Particularly during these early months and years it fulfils many possible functions: marking an exact spot, providing a tangible link, creating a focus for grief, making a public statement, providing a permanent record, and allowing the bereaved person to continue to have a role with the deceased, in that the memorial may need tending. With the passage of time, a memorial's psychological value diminishes somewhat, and ultimately many bereaved people are content to have memories of their loved one as the main memorial.

Support for Families of Murder Victims

The National Association of Victims Support Schemes (NAVSS) has announced details of a new project to offer support to the relatives of people bereaved by murder. The scheme, which is funded by the Home Office, will this year be operating in Merseyside, Sheffield, Essex and five areas of South London. It will provide specially trained volunteers to offer emotional support and practical advice. Referrals will come primarily from the police, and the project is being evaluated by a research team from Liverpool University.

The scheme's co-ordinator, Jane Cooper, sees the new scheme as a natural extension to the network of local Victims Support Schemes which already offers a volunteer service to victims of crimes such as burglary and mugging. A pilot scheme set up by NAVSS in Essex two years ago has shown that the families of murder victims have special needs which in most cases are not being met through existing agencies, such as specific information about police and legal procedures, compensation and intrusion of the media. Anger and fear may last several years.

Helpers will be drawn from existing volunteers who will be given additional training. The scheme will liaise both locally and nationally with organisations such as Cruse. On average there are 550 murders a year in Britain and the Essex pilot scheme had received 30 referrals over a two-year period.

NAVSS is at 17a Electric Lane, London SW9 8LA, tel. 01-326 1084.