

Roadside memorials

Making grief visible



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Abstract: Roadside memorials are an increasingly common phenomenon. They are placed to mark the site of fatal road accidents or other sudden deaths and can take many forms, ranging from simple floral tributes to so-called 'ghost bicycles'. These memorials make grief very visible and can be of great importance to bereaved families and friends as a marker of the place where their loved one died. They also serve as a warning of the dangers of the road and for other road users to take greater care. There can be some opposition to these memorials, particularly from national and local authorities, although campaign organisations have called for greater sensitivity towards and awareness of their significance.

Keywords: Visible grief, shrines, remembrance, warning, continuing connection

Flowers, cards and mementos by the side of the road or tied to lamp posts to mark the site of fatal crashes or other sudden deaths have become a familiar sight throughout Europe, Canada, Australia, North and South America, and elsewhere.

These public, communal manifestations of grief have been called 'spontaneous shrines' (Santino, 2001); they 'emerge quickly and often within a few hours of an event' and stay in place for a short period (Grider, 2001). In some cases more permanent memorials are later erected at these sites.

In some countries they are a relatively new phenomenon: they did not appear in Australia until the 1980s (Clarke & Franzmann, 2002). Elsewhere they seem to be part of a continuing tradition, probably Roman Catholic in origin, of remembering the dead and marking death in public places. They can be powerful public reminders of individual tragedies (Collins & Rhine, 2003), and generally mark road traffic accidents, although some mark suicides, deaths by drowning and other tragic deaths.

These memorials can meet with strong opposition and are considered illegal in several states in the US. Recent research (Churchill & Tay, 2008) suggests, however, that official and unofficial responses to these memorials vary, and many statutory authorities demonstrate sensitivity to their significance for the bereaved.

A number of contemporary studies have interviewed family members and friends of the deceased (Hartig & Dunn, 1998; Santino, 2001; Everett, 2002; Excell, 2004, among others). Their findings suggest that these roadside memorials serve two main purposes – remembrance and warning.

Remembrance and a continuing connection

Roadside memorials can be deeply personal sites of remembrance and may provide a continuing connection with the dead. For some family members and friends, the place of death and site of the memorial becomes the location for a continuing dialogue with the dead (Everett, 2002). One bereaved family member speaking on an Australian radio programme, explained their feelings thus:

'[It's] where he lost his life and where he will always be ... I won't go out to the cemetery because that's not where he is ... he is here at the cross.' (ABC Australia, 7 December, 2003)

For many of these family members, it would appear that the place of death becomes the place where the living feel closest to the deceased. The memorials may become an equivalent to a sacred place and place of pilgrimage that is visited and maintained for months or even years. Clarke and Cheshire (2003, p214) report 'ample evidence to indicate that many

roadside memorials are revisited on holidays, the birthday of the deceased and the anniversary of the fatal crash’.

A study conducted on the N4 major routeway in Ireland (MacConville & McQuillan, 2005) recorded birthday cards at some memorials and wreaths at Christmas. Roadside memorials are common in Ireland and are part of a tradition of marking death in open places (Nic Neill, 1948). While many traditional cultural practices change or die out over time, the erection and continued significance of these memorials seems ongoing. For example, the same study recorded another memorial on the N4 routeway – a delicate metal cross erected to a child who died in 1949, aged nine years. Although there is no indication of when the memorial was actually erected, its style and form suggest it has been there for some time. When the researcher visited the site in 2004, fresh flowers had been placed there to mark the 55th anniversary of the child’s death, clearly demonstrating that this is an enduring site of remembrance and continuing connection.

In a small study involving interviews with 14 people who had erected roadside memorials, Collins and Rhine (2003)

found that nearly all rejected the notion that the purpose of these memorials was to ‘say goodbye’; rather, the emphasis was on continuing the connection, with frequent references to ‘not letting go’. Collins and Rhine go on to argue that these memorials are prompted by the strong feelings of guilt, loss, impotence and separation provoked by a sudden and unexpected death, and that those creating the memorials do so in the clear belief that the deceased can still ‘see’ and ‘know’ what is taking place at the site of their death.

Memorials as warnings

Roadside memorials and ‘spontaneous shrines’ can also act as a warning of the dangers of the road for other road users and have become a way of expressing this. For example, the front cover of the *Sunday Times* magazine in 2004 featured a roadside ‘spontaneous shrine’ to illustrate an article on the dangers of the A59 in England (26 September, 2004).

The UK charity RoadPeace (see box overleaf) was founded in February 1992 to support bereaved and injured road crash



The roadside shrine commemorating the spot in Barnes, south-west London, where rock musician Marc Bolan died in a car crash in 1977. Photo © John Inglis

RoadPeace

The aim of the RoadPeace Remember Me plaques is to provide a permanent memorial to 'lives lost and devastated through road crashes and to provide a warning to other road users regarding the everyday risks of road use' (RoadPeace, 2009).

RoadPeace actively campaigns for improvements in road safety to reduce the need for roadside memorials in the first place, but it acknowledges that, where a fatal crash has occurred, there is a need for them, not only as a response to private grief but also to raise public awareness.

RoadPeace wants local authorities to adopt the same policy for roadside memorials as they do for memorials to victims of violent crimes. For example, when a young man, Ben Kinsella, was murdered in north London in 2008, many tributes and mementos were placed where he died. These were removed after a period of time, with Ben's family's blessing, and the Metropolitan Police and the local authority placed a sensitive and respectful notice at the site, with the suggestion that future tributes be placed on a website set up to memorialise Ben – an approach advocated by RoadPeace with regard to all roadside memorials. www.roadpeace.org

victims. In 2003 it launched its Remember Me campaign and over 2000 Remember Me plaques have since been placed at the sites of fatal road accidents as a non-denominational reminder of the dangers of the roads.

However, ironically, such roadside memorials have themselves provoked concerns about safety. Some UK local authorities have set limits on how long bereaved families can lay flowers at the site of a fatal crash – sometimes as little as two weeks – and some are seeking a ban on permanent roadside memorials (see Gadhre, 2004). These restrictions are said to have been made for safety reasons and on the advice of the police, who fear that the tributes could distract motorists and so cause further accidents.

International attitudes

Erecting roadside memorials as a way both of marking the place where people have been killed and of highlighting the inherent dangers of the roads also happens in other countries. In the US, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) have erected roadside memorials to those who have died, especially as a result of drink driving. The aim of families involved in the erection of these memorials is explicitly both to memorialise the deceased and educate other road users about the dangers of the particular stretch of road (Everett, 2002).

Less orthodox forms of roadside memorials are also emerging. Ghost bikes first appeared in St Louis, US, in 2003 to mark places where bicyclists are killed or injured in road traffic accidents. A bicycle is painted white and locked to a street sign near the crash site, together with a small plaque. They serve as reminders of the tragedy that took place on an otherwise anonymous street corner, and as quiet statements in support of cyclists' right to safe travel.

Ghost bikes have since spread throughout the US and are now appearing in cities elsewhere. In the UK they have appeared in Wales, and in London, Oxford, Brighton and York. Many are the work of cycling groups who want not only to remember the dead but also to draw attention to the vulnerability of cyclists (Bedell, 2008). Thus these bikes incorporate the dual purpose of other roadside memorials, acting both as a shrine and as a warning.

Conclusion

Roadside memorials make grief very visible and are powerful reminders of the impact of sudden and tragic deaths. In making grief visible they can also be uncomfortable reminders of loss and bereavement and also of our vulnerability on the road. The dual impact of these memorials can be harnessed to recognise and acknowledge the lives that have been lost and the pain experienced by bereaved families, while reminding road users to take more care. ■

For further information about RoadPeace visit www.roadpeace.org, tel 020 7733 1603, email info@roadpeace.org. Information about the Ghost Bike campaign is available at <http://www.ghostbikes.org>

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