

Online Memorials: Grief and Ritual in the Modern Age

By Jeremy F. Cohen

Online memorialization websites that offer to digitally preserve the memory of a deceased person have been steadily growing in popularity since their inception in the 1990s. A search for “online memorial” on Google reveals a plethora of websites that combine some form of image, video, biographical or genealogical function. For many people who have lived through the exponential growth of technology and the internet over the last two decades, the digitization of grief and bereavement may appear to be a logical step. Memorialization websites reveal an inherent need to make death a dialectic; to talk to and bring back the dead. If we problematize grief and bereavement, several questions arise. What is it that explains the rise of digital memorials versus more traditional western death rituals and ceremonies? Are digital memorials wholly different or are they an extension of traditional bereavement? Why is it that memorialization websites have risen in popularity over the last decade? The answers lie in the examination of the ways that people grieve, in a shift in the understanding of death and the self, the desire to continue living through the memory of others and in the general fears and anxieties of death.

Online memorial websites are spaces where people can remember, celebrate and discover the life of a person who has died. These pages are usually started by someone's immediate family, although pages are often created for dead celebrities by strangers. These memorial pages are usually accessible to the public and allow people to interact by leaving messages of condolence, accessing genealogical data and viewing photographs and videos. As our lives are becoming increasingly digital, a growing concern has been how to manage online life after death. Bank accounts, blogs and social media accounts all remain active when one dies. As is the case with social media, a deceased person's profile can remain online and inaccessible to others perpetually. This poses many difficulties for friends and family during the grieving process and digital memorials have been offered as a possible solution.

In his work on cultural interactions, anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes:

As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defect, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable- something, as we say, sufferable.¹

This notion that religion acts not as a barrier to suffering but as the bearer of suffering is a notion that has its roots in early religious history. What Geertz is arguing here is not that any religious group would deny suffering, but rather that they account for ways to transcend it. Religion shapes our reality and it also anchors our ability to express emotions, sentiments, grief, etc.² The premise of many world religions has been to offer solutions to the problem of suffering. Jews, Muslims and Christians have complex theodicy as well as eschatological concepts within apocalyptic narratives. Hindus and Buddhists believe that suffering is an essential element that

exists within reality and that the transcendence of this suffering works as an ultimate goal. With this understanding of suffering, religion and the grief process in mind, how can we conceptualize and represent the reasons for the popularity of digital memorialization?

Sociologist David Chidester says that as a culture we need to form collective memories and commemorations that keep a person alive.³ These include Funerals, cemeteries, shrines and memorials. Traditionally memorials have been physical landmarks such as monuments, plaques and tombstones. As the historian Pierre Nora argues, “monuments are built in place of memory, allowing us to displace the location of memory so that we do not have to hold it within ourselves.”⁴ These monuments are meeting places where grief can be unloaded from the mourner. Monuments also become places of visitation where one is encouraged to connect with the dead. Although the internet appears as an ephemeral space that is in constant flux, it can be argued that memorialization websites achieve the same effect, if not to a greater extent, as their physical counterparts. Sociologist Maya Socolovsky says:

The internet has thus become a place of departure and presence that is interactive and personal enough so that those in mourning can manipulate the details of the memorial and at the same time experience it as a meeting-place for lost loved ones to communicate with them.⁵

The way that we mourn is less important than the fact that we mourn. As Clifford Geertz said, emotions are *cultural artifacts*, “cultural styles of bereavement organize the experience of grief.”⁶ As we move towards a technological singularity, so too will our bereavement adjust.

Online memorials then work to close the gap between the living and the dead. The ability of immediate visitation of the dead; the archiving of life’s moments and the public nature of the internet and of memorialization websites break the boundaries of death. In the West, the grieving process is often seen as fomenting negative emotions. Mourners are often told to “get over it” or to “move on” after an indeterminate amount of time has passed following a death.⁷ This sentiment often betrays the reality of grief: that it is a process which takes many forms and has no set time limit. Perhaps then, digital memorials are the forms of resistance to a Western attitude towards death? Death separates us from two different planes of “existence” and our need to connect with the dead, to keep their memory alive is a driving force behind death rituals. Physical spaces share an important difference between online spaces of memorialization. Physical spaces separate the living and the dead. They serve as reminders of the absence of death.⁸ Online memorials close the gap between the living and the dead. Memorials, both online and physical allow for bereavement by externalizing grief but online memorials allow the griever access to the dead through constructive mediums such as genealogy, photography and writing. Moreover, the ability to leave messages of condolence and to interact with the memorial website, allows us to write ourselves into individual and collective memory.⁹

Death is a great cause of anxiety in our lives. We worry about our mortality, we fear the afterlife and worry about our future. Humans want their memories to be collected, to be

remembered and displayed.¹⁰ Philippe Aries speaks of three traditional forms of death: the tame death, the sudden death and the death of a Saint. The *tame death* is accepted and prepared for, the *sudden death* is vile and unwanted and the death of a saint is beautiful and honoured.¹¹ What humans seek are the *tame death* or the *saintly death*. These two forms of death have been placed in the collective unconscious as noble ways to die while the *sudden death* continues to be treated as vile and invisible. Whereas modernity, humanism and the growing secularity have done away with the concept of the *sudden death* by no longer linking it with the Christian concept of sin,¹² so to have memorial websites become the antithesis of the *sudden death*. Memorial websites elevate the deceased to an equal platform and give equal access to the public. Memorial websites for the relatively unknown sit alongside websites for the rich and the famous. It allows humans to feel exceptional and extraordinary; to believe that there is life in death.

Death is a certainty in life and with it comes anxiety, fear, social constructions, rituals, power dynamics, economics and grief. Death is a barrier, a state of being wholly separate from ours and a divide no living person can cross and return from. Thus we want to be voyeurs of death. Online memorials provide a space for us to unleash our collective desire to know death, to know what we cannot. While online memorials are but an extension of traditional death rituals and bereavement, they offer several important distinctions. Unlike physical memorial spaces which serve as a reminder of this distinction between living and dead, the online medium severs this barrier and creates a virtual meeting place for the dead and the living. This in essence makes death a dialect and allows us to feel a connection with the dead when we are alive and a connection with the living when we are dead. Digital memorials and the conversation they foster between the living and dead speak to the necessity of keeping memories alive while simultaneously manufacturing identity through public display. Finally, online memorials give us the chance of having a known, extraordinary and exceptional death that was once denied by the Church and by social normative values. What has changed has come with modern cultural and societal shifts, the shifting power relations of the Christian Church and the ways in which technology allows us to connect to the dead. David Chidester says that we need to form collective memories and commemorations to keep a person alive. Perhaps it has become more important for us to believe we can have a real connection with the living once we have died?

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Endnotes

¹ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a cultural system," in *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 104.

² *Ibid.*

³ David Chidester, *Patterns of Transcendence: Religion, Death, and Dying* (Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1990), 16.

⁴ Maya Socolovsky, "Cyber-Spaces of Grief: Online Memorials and the Columbine High School Shootings," *JAC* 24:2 (2004): 468.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 470.

⁶ Chidester, *Op. Cit.*, 219.

⁷ Lisa M. Mitchell, "Death and grief on-line: Virtual memorialization and changing concepts of childhood death and parental bereavement on the Internet," in *Health Sociology Review* 21:4 (2012): 413.

⁸ Socolovsky, *Op. Cit.*, 470.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 471.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 472.

¹¹ Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 36, 44, 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

