

Roadside Memorials

What lies behind the growing numbers of crosses and shrines appearing on the site of fatal accidents along our major roads?

They're appearing in greater numbers along our major roads and highways - crosses, flowers, trinkets, messages, spontaneous shrines in honour of someone who has died in a road crash at that spot.



Simple or elaborate, makeshift or permanent, they are the public markers of private trauma and grief, and turn public land into private sacred space.

David Busch, from Radio National's [Encounter](#) program, looks at what these roadside memorials mean for the people who place them, and what this growing phenomenon might suggest about our society's changing spiritual and cultural values about death and grief.

Follow this link for a transcript of [White Lines, White Crosses](#), first broadcast on Sunday 7 December, 2003. You can also [listen to the audio of the program](#) for four weeks after each broadcast.

Do you have a story to tell about roadside memorials? Leave a message in our [Religion & Ethics Guestbook](#) for everyone to read.

Jennifer Clark and Majella Franzmann have another view on roadside memorials in Australia. They consider these memorial sites to be enigmatic expressions of popular spiritual life existing outside of established religions. *Reprinted from Pointers, journal of the [Christian Research Association](#), Australia (September 2002).*

Born to Eternal Life – The Roadside as Sacred Space

On the Pacific Highway in NSW, north of Clybucca, is a white cross by the roadside.

It tells any passerby that Timothy was born on November 5, 1987 and on April 8, 2001 he was 'born to eternal life'. Motorists speeding by see Timothy's memorial out of the corner of an eye, friends and family come to mourn there and bring floral tributes, and road maintenance workers know to leave it alone.

In the process of claiming public road space for themselves, those who construct these memorials clearly desire to go beyond the management of mourning practices and spaces provided by the traditional authorities of the church and the state. Timothy was 'born to eternal life' by the roadside; that place is now sacred space.

Roadside memorials for victims of road trauma are not new. However, they have become more popular in the past 10 to 15 years.

The memorials usually consist of a number of separate elements including a cross, flowers, and a plaque with names, dates and sometimes messages of grief. Variations are found – a bunch of flowers tied to a guide-post, silk flowers woven in and out of a fence line for a metre or more, or a large construction that looks uncannily like a grave site in any old cemetery.

Adorning the memorials are the individual touches – messages, teddy bears, photographs, a basketball hoop, a bike frame and a Jim Beam bottle.

Very often the memorial will carry a message that would normally be found on a tombstone, commonly ‘RIP’, or a list of the loved ones left behind.

In all cases the memorials are expressions of grief at the loss of life from road trauma. Although memorials that use apparent religious symbols signal a significant link with Christian faith, this is not necessarily the case. The use of such symbols may in fact be little more than an attempt to find culturally appropriate symbols to express death, where there has previously been a paucity of such symbols apart from those offered by institutional religion.

To characterise the sacred aspect of the roadside memorial, we are perhaps more correct in deeming it to be spiritual or religious in the general or broadest sense, rather than explicitly linked to any particular church or religious institution.

The memorials are a means by which people engage the question of death and afterlife, the meaning of mourning the dead, and hope for peace for those departed and themselves who mourn.

The memorials witness primarily to the spiritual significance of place. Their role is to mark the very spot where life was lost. Some memorials are explicit about that and refer, for example, to Sharon who was ‘tragically killed at this spot’ or Sandra, Stacey and Joanne, all ‘tragically taken at this spot’ or Jody who ‘died here’.

The space continues to be significant long after the death and initial mourning. In many cases, the life of family and friends of the dead goes on in conjunction with the memorial. This is where the communication with the dead continues—the birthday cards, flowers on anniversary days, and gifts at Christmas. This communication is clearly seen by some as equivalent to what one might do in a cemetery setting at a graveside.

Chris Ross, in an article in *American City & County* (May 1998), quotes family members who disagreed with those who erected a memorial for one of the family that it was ‘almost like going to the cemetery every day.’

When a roadside memorial is erected it suggests that the cemetery or crematorium is unsatisfying as a focal point for mourning. Anecdotally the place of death holds a stronger spiritual connection with the individual than any place of final rest of the body. There remains something intrinsically more important about the place where life ceased

or, more accurately, where a life-changing event occurred.

One victim reportedly placed flowers at the site of her crash, even though no-one had died there, because she felt as if the place still had a hold over part of her life.

There are a number of possible answers to the question of why the place of death has become more important than the place of burial or the interment of the ashes. When the state-controlled secularised cemeteries replaced the more communally-based churchyards in the 19th Century, a sense of community was lost, as well as a spiritually meaningful place to mourn the dead.

‘The cemetery,’ wrote Thomas W. Laquer, ‘would not speak of a place but of people from all places ... unknown to each other in life and thrown together in a place with which they might have had only the most transitory acquaintance’.

It may also be that the construction of memorials fits within a larger program of decreasing interest in the traditional churches generally, a failure to see importance or meaning in church-based rituals, and an increasing tendency to see spiritual authority resting with the individual conscience.

Since the 1960s the authority of the state has also been questioned, leading to a general dissatisfaction with state control of what may be termed personal or moral matters, including the control of mourning in some way through policies regulating burial.

Where there has been ritual of some kind for the road victim, in a church or religious setting, the roadside memorials represent a further construction of mourning space, perhaps even prior to the official rituals. Family and/ or friends of the victim are usually responsible for the construction of the memorial which may hinge on a variety of purposes: remembrance, grief, closure or reestablishment of a sense of personal control over a set of uncontrollable circumstances.

These purposes should have been covered by the funeral and the cemetery. Why is it not enough to have a grave to visit? Why does the funeral service, perhaps the last bastion of religious influence in many people’s lives, not satisfy the need to mourn?

Families and others feel they have the right to set up roadside memorials which function outside of official religion and outside of official burial grounds. Penny, the mother of Josh who died in a car crash in 2001, established a memorial for her son at the site of his death. She was distressed when a passerby criticised her for leaving flowers.

‘I can still hear this woman saying to me’, she wrote to the Herald Sun in February 2002, ‘ “I know this was sad, but it’s not fair on me to have to look at these flowers”. Believe me,’ wrote Penny, ‘this is a lot more than “sad”. How anybody feels they have the right to tell somebody not to place flowers where their child died is beyond me’.

While there has been little or no response from the traditional churches to the erection of

roadside memorials, some local government authorities disallow or restrict roadside memorialisation. This is no barrier to their erection. Their presence represents an attempt to regain control over an intimately tragic and unexpectedly traumatic event.

In this way, the modern construction of roadside memorials is a specific expression of a bigger phenomenon, a current groundswell of disregarding institutional forms that once sufficed for the crisis moments of life.

More than ever, people are beginning to take religion and meaning-making out of the hands of the government or established religions. Chris Ross has gone so far as to say of the roadside memorials: 'in probably no other area of public life does public practice diverge so dramatically from official policy.'

Roadside memorials are enigmatic expressions of popular spiritual life existing outside established religions and often in contravention to the regulations of the state. They appear as a private expression of grief which turns a public place into sacred space.

Their existence and tacit approval from the public suggests that as a community we are searching for more meaningful ways than those provided by institutional religion to express our spiritual selves when we are most vulnerable.

Dr Jenny Clark and Professor Majella Franzmann are at the University of New England, Armidale, NSW. Reprinted from Pointers, journal of the [Christian Research Association](#), Australia (September 2002).

WWW Links

[The Road as Shrine Project](#)

By Sue Anne Ware of RMIT, Melbourne. Website of the project to create a natural vegetation "shrine" to mark road fatalities alongside a stretch of highway near Morwell, Victoria.

[Roadside Memorials: Some Australian Examples](#)

Article by Robert Smith published in Folklore (UK) journal, 1999.

[Roadside memorials: public places of private grief](#)

Research paper presented at the All Souls Conference: Death and Beyond, at the University of Amsterdam, January 2007.

[Roadside Memorials on the American Highway](#)

Black and white images by David Nance.

[Irish Roadside Memorials](#)

The elaborate crosses, monuments, memorials and inscriptions which can be found at the road verges of Ireland. 450+ memorials photographed, located and described.

X [Roadside Memorials of America](#)

Starkly simple images of rural tragedies.

[International Symposium on Roadside Memorials](#)

This inaugural event was held at the University of New England, Armidale, in June 2004.