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Personalized Gravestones: Your Life's Passion for All to See and Hear

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Abstract

In the past several years, a trend has developed that in an earlier age would have seemed inappropriate and perhaps even morbid; the increased personalization of gravestones (memorials). What makes this trend interesting is the variety of shapes, designs, manufacturing processes, and types of personalization actually appearing on gravestones, including seven-inch LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) screens recessed into the face of memorials. This paper discusses gravestones (memorials) in a religious context. It examines the rapidly developing market for elaborately designed memorials both in their traditional forms, typically vertical and created out of granite with just a name and date of death, to memorials in every conceivable size, shape and colour portraying scenes of the deceased's everyday life. Although this paper concentrates on memorials found in Christian, mostly Catholic and Protestant cemeteries, references to personalization, or lack of it, in Jewish and Muslim cemeteries are also discussed. Briefly addressed are references to advances in the latest engraving processes that are now making these personalized memorials possible.

Personalized Memorials–Background

[1] The American attitude toward death and the manner in which the deceased is remembered have traditionally been viewed through cultural, psychological and religious perspectives (Rotella, Gold, Andriani, Scharf and Chenoweth 2003, 65). It has been pointed out that "With the exception of wars, which invite memorials and searches for graves, the 20th century moved death into hospitals and away from daily life. Public displays of mourning such as black armbands, which were as common as graveside visits, were being replaced by other methods of remembering the deceased" (Lee 2002, B9).

[2] Jennifer Wolcott, in an article entitled, "Commemorating a life: more Americans are choosing to customize memorial and funeral services" (Christian Science Monitor, March 1999), points out that in the past 40 to 50 years, society has become increasingly mobile, fast-paced and technical, which has a direct bearing on the move toward personalization in the funeral business.

With transience becoming almost a norm, the link that once existed between a family and a particular church, denomination or religious leader (priest, minister, rabbi or imam), religious burial traditions have begun to fade, to be replaced by a trend toward personalization (Wolcott 1999, 11).

[3] Hundreds of years ago, tombstones told the story of a person's life. This traditionally included their name, dates of birth and death, and in some instances an inscription reflecting on their life, in effect a memorial in death. However, today's memorials are moving to another level. Cemetery monuments are no longer relics with traditional designs such as a crucifix, roses or entirely devoid of any ornamentation like those found in American cemeteries of the 1930s and 1940s. Creating memorial monuments that tell a story in stone (cemetery art), and in some instances on video screens, now commemorate a person's life in ways never before imagined.

[4] How Americans choose to celebrate a life after death has become increasingly creative and personal with services that often include tangible remembrances of the deceased. Examples include not only pictures of loved ones placed on or in the coffin but other objects representing the deceased's lifetime pursuits; a favourite golf club or other sports related item, pictures of a boat, a favourite piece of music playing in the background, and anything else that might remind the mourners of the life of the departed. This has the effect of leaving mourners with the sense of the deceased having truly celebrated life. This level of personalization also includes customized caskets.

[5] During the Puritan period, grave markers basically consisted of piles of stones with a small boulder crudely engraved with the name of the deceased and their date of death. Once professional stonecutters began practicing their trade, slate became a popular material for use in gravestones due to its softer, more malleable texture. As stonecutting techniques advanced, so did the level of elaboration as well as the number of symbols that began to appear on the face of markers: "Skeletons, winged hourglasses, and shattered urns were gruesome symbols of death that later gave way to symbols such as cherubs, wreaths, and weeping willows. Very often an occupational symbol, an emblem from a fraternal organization, or a portrait of the deceased was used" (Alirangues 2003). [*]

[6] Throughout the centuries, individuals and their families chose to design and construct their own memorials. In the Jewish tradition "after Rachel died, 'Jacob erected a monument on Rachel's grave' (Gen 35:20)" (Kadden and Kadden 1997). The sarcophagi of ancient Egypt are highly personalized and lavishly decorated with beautifully detailed hieroglyphics. While the pyramids and other architectural wonders such as the Taj Mahal in India represent the grandeur that monumental art has achieved they share something very basic with monuments of all styles constructed through the ages–they were created to commemorate the lives of individuals and the respect and love others had for them.

[7] Pre-Christian Romans practiced both cremation and inhumation (burial). Roman tombstones commonly contained a sculpture of the deceased, basic demographic information, a list of public offices held, services performed by the deceased, and dedicatory inscriptions by family members: "Although tombstone inscriptions were often formulaic, they also could be intensely personal" (e.g., the Laudatio Turiae, RCiv, v.1, #183, 519; http://abacus.bates.edu).

[8] Christianized Romans incorporated Graeco-Roman iconography into their funereal symbolism. In the wake of the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War, the wealthy and powerful frequently added a name to the symbolic representation of the cadaver such as a skeleton positioned on the lower part of the tomb (transi-tombs). It was not until the seventeenth century that Christian iconography began to be seen on individual graves. Elaborately personalized funeral memorials may have actually begun with the aristocracy, but soon the bourgeoisie and the lower classes wanted to individualize their memorials as well. As a result, Christian tombs of the time combined both religious and social aspects of a person's life, often indicating the deceased's trade (Daly 2005). In the Anglo-Saxon world, the cross became strongly associated with Catholicism, and it was not until the High Church Revival in the mid-nineteenth century, which coincided with the revival of emblematic art, that crosses commonly appeared in Britishand other Anglo-Saxon graveyards (Daly 2005).

[9] In the Victorian period, mourners would create elaborate cemetery monuments that captured life and the inevitability of mortality: "Victorian cemeteries contain various memorials encrusted with signs and symbols such as creeping vines, sleeping babies, even a scythe-bearing Grim Reaper" (Schwartz 1992, A1). An example of this is the evolution of gravestone symbols commonly found in Puritan New England cemeteries such as death's heads, cherubs, urns and willows commonly found from 1620-1820. In fact, "the stylistic evolution from death head to cherub reflects the exact time period in which the Great Awakening (1735-1750) brought about a change in Puritan attitudes toward life, death, and the afterlife" (Eastman 2002). Mourners of that time would have a difficult time recognizing the changes that have taken place with regard to today's personalized monuments.

[10] Today, monuments fall into three basic general categories: upright monuments, flat markers and family-owned mausoleums. Upright monuments, those rising above lawn level, have traditionally been the most common. They are often used as memorials for an entire family, providing space for the names of the family members plus room for an inscription or personalization. It is exactly this type of flexibility for personalization that has made this type of memorial popular today. Flat markers, traditionally made of bronze and placed at ground level, are usually designed specifically for burial identification for only one person with no allowance for personalization. In most cases, the memorial's small size limits most, if not all, personalization alternatives. The third category, the family owned mausoleum, is the largest of the monuments. Typically designed for single or multiple entombments, these have been attractive to families desiring an especially private internment location.

Memorialization Preferences: Who is the Demographic?

[11] To gain a better understanding of memorialization preferences, the Cold Spring Granite Memorial Group commissioned the firm of Russell & Herder of Brainerd, MN to conduct a comprehensive survey that gauged the memorialization preferences of Americans by region, age, income and ethnicity; 1,000 consumers, males and females 45 years old and over, were randomly selected for telephone interviews within four regions (northeast, southeast, west and central), providing an overall statistical reliability of +/-3.2 percent at the 95 percent confidence level: "We discovered that the basic form of memorialization for many people today–a gray stone monument or flat bronze marker–has not changed over the past 50 years. We

wondered how this could be and if people would be interested in having wider memorialization preferences" (Baklarz 2003). The results confirmed a strong lack of awareness of memorialization products and options. In addition, a separate focus group dialogue with 10 people representing the memorialization market confirmed that people are interested in discussing new memorialization options if they are exposed to them. A typical response was that people don't usually get up in the morning looking to research the market for gravestones.

[12] Traditionally, those choosing to remember their deceased family members through the display of memorials have selected above-ground vertical and horizontal granite headstones or bronze markers placed in the ground. In addition, other options include a private or family mausoleum, a community mausoleum, a columbarium which is a granite structure containing niches that can be placed outside or inside, above ground, a garden crypt, an urn containing cremation ashes, and a scattering garden where cremated remains are scattered in a cemetery or consecrated location (Russell & Herder 2003). Not surprisingly, Californians were among the first to adopt more progressive and elaborate types of funerals than those traditionally found in the rest of the America.

Baby-Boomers and the Emerging Market for Personalized Memorials

[13] A Los Angeles Times article on "consumer-conscious funeral shoppers" explains that "the aging of the baby-boom generation 'represents the crest of a wave poised to engulf the funeral industry with demands for reasonably priced, often individually tailored celebrations of passage'" (Rotella, Gold, Andriani, Scharf and Chenoweth 2003, 65). In 2003, more Americans died than the entire population of Kuwait. That number, more than 2.2 million deaths as stated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, doubled to 4.1 million in 2004. The estimated 76.5 million baby boomers born from 1946-1964 will account for the majority of the deaths in the upcoming decades: "As a leading voice for funeral service, NFTA (National Funeral Directors Association) has been tracking trends and working with funeral directors and consumers for more than 120 years. With the rise of baby boomers, funeral service consumers are making funeral decisions based on different values than their previous generation" (National Funeral Directors Association 2004-2005, 118). One of the more recent developments in this shift in making funeral decisions is in the area of memorial personalization which has resulted in a dramatic increase in unique and meaningful services, including personalized monuments.

[14] As part of the research for this paper, Eric Fogarty of Dodds Monuments in Xenia, OH was contacted. In an email dated January 3, 2006, Fogarty mentions that personalized memorials are undoubtedly an important part of the memorial business, but that many memorial companies have very different definitions of "personalized" and the manner in which memorialists–those in the memorial business–market products to families to create a personalized memorial. In addition, the manner in which personalized memorials are marketed is a continuous process that includes advertising, promotional literature, ongoing sales training, and presentations to family members. Marketing personalized memorials is not confined to one aspect of the memorial business and understanding the significant role that a memorialist plays in a family's grieving process is critical. John Horan, spokesman for the National Funeral Directors Association, has recently observed: "We're seeing monuments that

reflect more of a person's family and their personal interests and significantly less regarding an individual's religious conviction" (Hogan/Albach 2005).

[15] The twenty-first century tombstone has undergone a significant transformation. No longer do tombstones represent religious affiliations such as Christian or Jewish with representations of crosses and stars of David. Today, due to advances in technology, these tombstones are literally taking on personalities of their own. One company, Memory Studios in Albany, NY, estimates that business nearly doubled since they began offering computer-drawn etching in 1992 (Wechsler 2003). The cost of creating a personalized tombstone using the computer etching process can be from $100 to $500 in addition to the price of the marker.

[16] Mel Lommel, general manager of the Royal Melrose division of the Cold Spring Granite Company says that "he has seen a noticeable increase in the number of personalized memorials. 'The trend is certainly toward highly personalized, custom memorials. We're getting more requests to recreate the symbols of a person's interests and life. We only expect memorialization to become more specialized and more unique' Lommel says. I guess that's why we call our designers and fabricators "granite artists" because that is what they are increasingly called upon to create'" (Cold Spring Granite 1999).

[17] As with many other preferences in their lives, baby-boomers tend to take a different approach to the matters of dying and memorials. They love technology and their customized funeral send-offs frequently include DVD tributes: "Boomers are more likely to do their own thing when it comes to death-related issues like burial and memorialization" says Phil Goodman, of Generation Transitional Marking in San Diego, CA. "As a group; they haven't been forced to deal with death like prior generations. Now that their parents are dying and they are faced with those decisions, they are doing it their own way" (Cold Spring Granite 1999).

Personalization on Jewish Memorials

[18] In the Jewish tradition, it is generally believed that "humankind is created in the image of God and we are, therefore, mandated to have respect for the deceased and also the body of the deceased. This is called kevod ha-met and is the guiding principal for Jewish burial and mourning customs" (A Guide to Jewish Burial and Mourning Practices). In the Orthodox Jewish tradition, there is no embalming, no viewing, no flowers and no funeral home involvement.

[19] Personalization in Jewish cemeteries does not exist to the extent found in Christian cemeteries, whether Catholic or Protestant. Traditionally, personalization of Jewish memorials tends to reflect the traditional symbols taken from Jewish synagogues such as the star of David (magen David), the symbol commonly associated with Judaism. This symbol on a gravestone traditionally affirms Jewish faith and commitment to Israel. In addition, the menorah with its seven branches symbolizing the seven days of creation is also a common form of personalization, but not to the extent of the cross in Christian cemeteries.

[20] The Jewish cemetery in the Town of Ozarow, Poland, that saw its population of Jews deported on October 22, 1942, provides an example of traditional gravestone carvings found in Eastern European Jewish cemeteries of the time. Distinctive features of gravestones in the

Ozarow cemetery include the Cohanim (two hands coming together in a priestly blessing), Leviim (water poured from a pitcher), several books in a bookcase, a lion or a tree, and for women, an outstretched hand with a donation of coins, a chandelier or candlesticks (Weinberg n.d.).

[21] In the Jewish tradition, gravestones or monuments (matzevah) are usually selected at least three months prior to the date of the unveiling ceremony (Cross and Field 2002). According to Kadden and Kadden, Judaism places no specific restriction or stipulation with regard to size or type of monument; however, most cemeteries have such regulations (Kaden and Kadden 1997). Symbols relating to the 12 tribes of Israel are occasionally represented on gravestones. The symbols most commonly used are those that represent specific professions. For instance, the temple horn blower might have a shofar or trumpet on his gravestone and the mohel or circumciser might have a knife. More contemporary symbols such as the "scales of justice" representing a lawyer are also commonly used. "In Jewish tradition, the Israelim, the broad masses, have no particular symbol, but frequently use the Star of David and Menorah" (Daly 2005):

Typically, markers found in Jewish cemeteries include the following: the English and Hebrew name of the deceased, the dates of birth and death in English and in Hebrew, and the relationship to other family members (i.e., father/mother, husband/wife, grandfather/grandmother, sister/brother, etc.). Also, one often finds the Hebrew letters pay nun, standing for "ponikbar(ah), here is buried," and the letters tav, nun, tzadee, bet, hay, standing for the phrase "May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life" (Kadden and Kadden 1997).

Other symbols traditionally found on Jewish memorials have included natural imagery such as doves and olive branches (cf. Gen 8:11). Puns are also found on Jewish gravestones (Daly 2005). In Jewish cemeteries, symbols of a religion other than Judaism are not usually permitted.

Lack of Personalization at Muslim Gravesites

[22] Unlike Christian and Jewish cemeteries, Muslim graveyards are completely devoid of monuments. At burial (al-dafin) the deceased is placed on his/her right side in the grave, preferably without a coffin. It is also prescribed that the deceased be placed along an east-west axis on an angle ensuring that the deceased is facing Mecca: "Family members should neither decorate the grave with plants or flowers or place a tombstone over it, and there must be a guarantee that the body will never be exhumed or otherwise disturbed in its eternal rest" (Schayani 2003). In the case of Bedouin (Muslim) burials, the burial place of the deceased is marked with stones indicating both the head and feet in a shallower grave than is typical of other ethnic groups.

[23] It should also be pointed out that in many European countries burial plots are not owned but leased. For Muslims this has created unique problems. For instance, in Germany, "the grave is not owned but only leased, usually for a maximum of 30 years, after which period the lease must either be renewed or the graveyard is plowed over and returned to another use. The same rule applies to some Muslim countries, although the reserved period there is usually 99 years" (Schayani 2003).

Video Gravestones: A Cultural Perspective

[24] Throughout the ages, every technology (especially communications technologies) has been a function of humankind's quest to overcome the problem of space and time. The quest for immortality is arguably an ultimate goal for achieving this kind of control. For example, the Egyptians used hieroglyphics to overcome such difficulties and ensure that the deceased had all the information necessary to survive in the afterlife (writing being considered a sacred technology that could transcend the limits of time/space). A recent discovery in Peru at Incan burial sites confirms that Incan men were buried with all of their most prized possessions, including their most beautiful and best-loved women (http://shastahome.com/machu-picchu/burial.html). Video gravestones can be seen as an extension of such attempts. The correlative avenue of analysis is, of course, humankind's quest for immortality. With video gravestones, the deceased can "live forever" (or at least for the15 years that the technology is built to last). Additionally, along with the expense of such a technology being within reason, video gravestones "democratize" immortality. In one respect, video gravestones can be considered another facet of the voyeurism that Americans in particular are fond of engaging in (hence, the onslaught of reality shows).

The Video Gravestone: Taking Personalization to the Next Level

[25] Today, video screens are not just for expensive LCD (liquid crystal display), DLP (digital light processing) and plasma televisions. They are also found in cell phones, the back of car head rests for playing video games on trips, in subway cars and even in bathrooms. The importance of this trend has been noted by funeralOne, the St. Clair, MI company whose mission it is to "make funeralOne the best funeral industry personalization, technology, and consulting firm in the world" (funeralOne 2005).

[26] To take personalized memorials to the next level, memorials with built-in video screens showing slides and/or videos of the deceased were inevitable: "Gary Collision, Professor of American Studies at Pennsylvania State University in Pittsburgh, thinks video tombstones are a natural progression from outsize monumental stonework. 'Cemeteries are places where people try to outdo each other, display their wealth and power. This would certainly be a new way to do that'" (Gosline 2004). Research has revealed that to date there have been three individuals who either have patents pending or patents approved for such products. One such entrepreneur is Robert Barrows of Burlingame, CA. Barrows has a patent pending for a weatherproofed, hollow gravestone, housing a microchip fitted with a flat LCD touch screen or in more elaborate units a plasma screen: "'There's no business like show business,' he told viewers of the NBC program, Today. 'Imagine how interesting it would be to go to tombstones where you didn't know the person or to a historical tombstone to find out what someone had to say'" (Gosline 2004). Another marketer of video headstones is Scott Mindrum, President of Making Everlasting Memories, located in Cincinnati, OH. Mindrum received a patent on a similar device in 1998 but never actually produced one. Finally, there is Sergio Aguire of Florida who quit his telecommunications job to work full time on what has become the best known memorial video screen product currently on the market, the Vidstone Serenity Panel manufactured and marketed by Vidstone LLC:

Installed at your grave-site – or in your mausoleum or columbarium–the 7-inch solar-powered LCD lets mourners relive your personal highs and dotcom lows. They just flip open the weatherproof cover and touch a button to start your slide show or movie. Vidstone founder Sergio Aguirre got the idea after attending a funeral that ended with jazz music and projected photos, including one of the deceased partying in a top hat and pink boa (Mitchell 2005, 14).

[27] funeralOne's Joseph Joachim is bullish on the Vidstone Serenity Panel. He also sees himself as the Walt Disney of the funeral business. A strange comparison, but no stranger than the Vidstone Serenity Panel. As a company that represents the needs of funeral directors across the U.S. and Canada, funeralOne is continually looking for ways to enhance its client's services: "'What we're trying to do is create the ultimate funeral experience'. Joachim said. 'Funeral directors are realizing it's an important service we can offer, and we're happy to offer it'" (Sim 2005), referring to the Vidstone.

[28] Research reveals that the differences between the designs, features and longevity as put forth by Barrows, Mindrum and Aquirre are not significantly different from one another. All offer units consisting of seven, fifteen and even twenty-three inch screens secured to the face of the gravestone. Notable differences include the manner in which the unit is powered. In Barrows model, "the tombstone would draw its electricity from the cemetery's lighting system. And to avoid a grave's soundtrack from clashing with the one next door, people can also listen through wireless headphones" (Gosline 2004). Priced at $1,500 and designed to last 15 years, the Vidstone Serenity Panel includes two standard headphone jacks and is powered by solar panels that protect the screen from sun damage while charging the unit's battery. Four hours of direct sunlight are able to power the unit for up to 90 minutes. In addition, the Vidstone Serenity Panel can function in temperatures between 32 degrees and 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

The Vidstone Serenity Panel in the United Kingdom

[29] Not only has the vidstone received significant attention among sellers of personalized memorials and funeral directors in the U.S. but it has also received attention in the United Kingdom. Sergio Aquirre, founder and developer of the Vidstone Serenity Panel, as recently as August 2005 said, "I think there is great potential for the Vidstone in the UK and other parts of the world. It is a unique and meaningful way to remember the deceased" (Johnston 2005).

[30] In order to begin marketing the Vidstone in the United Kingdom, Aguirre began by seeking assistance from U.K.-based funeral directors to begin promoting its unique interactive features. Since it is the custom of families throughout Europe to insert photographs of the deceased on the face of gravestones, the Vidstone could be considered the next logical step in personalizing memorials. Professor Paul Badham, a recognized expert on death and immortality at the University of Lampeter in Wales stated, "Throughout history people have wanted to be remembered, with the very important and well-known being recognized with statues in churches and cathedrals as memorials. This is an updated version" (Badham 2005). He went on to say that "the vidstone was not an inappropriate way to remember a loved one: it is healthy to want to be remember a relative in a living way" (Badham 2005).

[31] In an effort to gather information on the acceptance of personalized memorials and video memorials in the United Kingdom, Dr. Julie Rugg, Director of The Cemetery Research Group at the University of York, was consulted. Dr. Rugg mentioned that at this time there appears to be a limited demand for video memorials. She indicated that most people personalize a memorial by what they leave on the grave, i.e., perishable items rather than specific features such as pictures inserted directly into the memorial. Dr. Rugg went on to say that in the United Kingdom, local authorities tend to own their own cemeteries and separate private sector stone masons erect memorials so that innovations requiring any type of infrastructure change would be difficult to introduce. In addition, there is a high cremation rate in the United Kingdom (Rugg 2006).

Engraving Technology: Making the Difference

[32] One of the nation's oldest manufacturers of memorial products, the Cold Spring Granite Company, was the first effectively to use modern production methods as early as the 1920s. Cold Spring Granite "pioneered development of quarrying and granite fabrication machinery in the 1930's and modernized quarrying methods in the United States, including the drive-in system that eliminated the need for derricks to lift granite out of quarries, in the 1980's" (Cold Spring Granite 2002).

[33] Computer technology has effectively changed the face of both monuments and gravestones (Hogan/Albach 2005). This technological development, along with the skills of today's artisans, has made it possible for individuals to communicate their emotions through monumental art in ways never before thought possible. Before the availability of high-tech stone cutting equipment, the processes necessary to personalize memorials to the extent now available made personalization almost unthinkable, not to mention prohibitively expensive. The introduction of laser technology, computer-aided design tools and new diamond wire saws has enabled consumers to select memorials that more closely fit their personal preferences. In particular, "the combining of contour cutouts in the granite with etched or sandblasted carvings has enabled craftsmen to produce one complete design. Using this technique, craftsmen are now able to cut out part of a memorial to resemble, among other designs, the back half of a snowmobile, while the remainder of the design is completed by etching it into the face of the selected memorial" (Cold Spring Granite 1999). Having the technology available to design and construct memorials once considered impossible, from grand pianos and deer, can now take form.

[34] The actual process of designing and completing a personalized marker begins when the craftsperson draws the desired scene on a piece of thin paper. While the paper is attached to the granite, they begin to carve the scene with the diamond tip of a Dremel tool. Once that has been completed, the outline of the drawing is completed with shading. A coat of lithochrome is added and colour, if wanted, is painted on (York Daily Record 2002).

What's Next? Emerging Trends: The Memory Medallion among Others

[35] Several trends regarding the manner in which an individual chooses to be remembered after their death have emerged in the past several years. These include, but are not limited to, pre-recorded messages embedded directly into a memorial similar to the Vidstone Serenity Panel. One product, called the Memory Medallion, is in reality a digital memory device encased in

stainless steel. It is accessed with an electronic wand attached to a laptop computer or a hand-held PDA-type device. One photo and a story of up to 600 words are stored on the Memory Medallion and can be downloaded by visitors. The Memory Medallion is permanently affixed directly to a memorial. One of the differences between the Memorial Medallion and the Vidstone Serenity Panel is that the Memorial Medallion can be placed in almost any location the family chooses, including monuments, markers, civic memorials, columbaria and mausoleums. In addition, the Memory Medallion was created with the intention of creating a long lasting memorial. It uses a basic digital configuration that can be adapted along with other evolving technologies (Rock of Ages 2006). If for any reason the device malfunctions during the first 10 years of operation, it will be replaced at no charge. After that period, a fee for shipping and handling is charged.

[36] Along with high-tech advances such as the Medallion Memorial and the Vidstone Serenity Panel family mausoleums, the imprinting of colour pictures on memorial stones, individualized inscriptions and etched signatures and photographic images are also gaining in popularity (Voelpel 2005, 1). Other innovations making their way into the selection process include caskets painted in the favourite colour of the deceased, caskets engraved with names and military logos, and customized lid liners with representations of anything reminding mourners of the deceased and their interests and hobbies while alive, e.g., golf items and fishing holes. It appears that in death, as in life, the need to customize comes full circle.

[37] In addition to personalized memorials and gravestones implanted with interactive LCD screens, one other form of memorial personalization warrants a mention. This includes the internet memorial service where mourners who live in various parts of the world and who have access to a high-speed internet connection can watch a streaming video broadcast of the service wherever they may be.

Conclusion

[38] The move toward the personalization of gravestones creates some interesting philosophical/theological questions. For instance, how does a visual medium such as the Vidstone Serenity Panel affect the memorial visitor's sense of the loved one? Is there a sense of displacement? In addition, how does such a device such as an LCD display on a memorial reinforce the sense of the departed person as embodied? Does this, in any way, interfere with our thinking of the deceased as an immaterial soul? Is the move toward greater personalization of gravestones related to some kind of social anxiety about death, or about time passing too quickly in our hyper-teched-out worlds of instant gratification?

Have natural disasters such as the Indonesian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, along with threatened pandemics, heightened social anxieties, or at least awareness of death (Casey 2006)? If the practice of personalizing memorials become widespread will it subtly change how we think about life after death? Since the departed will, in fact, become frozen in time relative to the time the video was made, they will always be envisioned in the bodies they had while alive (Greig 2006).

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[*]Page numbers are not available for numerous parenthetical references because they refer to websites; urls are available in the References section.