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# **Monuments for stillborn children: Coming to terms with the sorrow, regrets and anger**

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### **Abstract**

In the Netherlands, until the years mid eighty of the previous century, health care professionals like doctors, midwives and nurses determined routines around birth. As a consequence and according to the protocols at the time, stillborn children were immediately taken away after birth. Parents most often did not get a chance, nor were they allowed seeing their child. Roman Catholic rules dictated that stillborn children who had not been baptized would be buried anonymously in hideaway and in the unconsecrated grounds of the graveyard. Doctors and nurses were taught during their training that it was best not induce emotions by acquainting the parents with their stillborn child because it would be more difficult for them to handle their loss once they had become attached, seen and held, their child. Parents were not openly allowed to grieve and they were almost forced to deny and ignore their stillborn child as if it had not existed at all.

The focus of this (qualitative) research in the field of ritual studies was on parents who have kept for a long time commemoration of their stillborn child within a private context. With the emergence as of 2001 of monuments to stillborn children (in the Netherlands at the moment more than 160), these parents have the opportunity to enact commemoration rituals in honour of their stillborn child and to share their individual memories with a wider audience. The purpose of the research was to study how collective and individual commemoration rituals enacted by parents at the site of a monument create meaning in coming to terms with the, often long time ago, loss of a stillborn child.

According to ritual specialist Ronald Grimes rituals both do and mean something: they 'work' by making meaning. The results of this qualitative research show that parents of stillborn children benefit from a public place of commemoration and they finally seem to come to terms with the loss of their stillborn children and with the disrespectful way in which others handled their child at the time of their stillbirth.

### **Introduction**

Probably one of the most difficult situation parents have to face occurs when their new born child is found with serious life threatening medical problems. A very emotional situation will arise when there is no hope the child will live. The mother may physically not be able to fully comprehend the near death of her child, born only minutes ago. The moment of welcoming to this world and saying farewell almost coincides. The way of acting of health care

professionals, like doctors, midwives or nurses, at this confusing and emotional moment is of the utmost importance to the parents. In a documentary on premature children and the difficult situation around their birth, this is very well shown; a doctor tells the father that they are unable to save his child, just born at twenty-six weeks of pregnancy. The child will soon die. The doctor, very compassionately, tells the father, who seems to be in shock: “Touch your child, give him a kiss with all you have in you, everything you have in your mind, give it to your child”.<sup>1</sup> The father only slowly comprehends the impact of the message and finally kisses his child farewell. While crying he leaves the room to share the terrible news with the mother.

This documentary was made in 2008 and offers an impressive insight into the intimate caring of children in danger of death around their birth. A caring which seems to be completely different from the situation until about thirty years ago. Until the years eighty of the previous century, the death of children around their birth was completely different ‘handled’ by health care professionals as follows from the testimony of a mother of a stillborn child. She was not allowed to see or to touch her child: “They did not tell me why I was not allowed to see her. It was my child, our child, there was no explanation nor any comfort” (Faro, 2015).

Next to the absent intimate contact between child and parents, children who died shortly before, during or shortly after birth were not given a funeral with the traditional funeral services. The hospital, or others, took care of the burial and nobody ever spoke again about what had happened, as another mother explains:

And that was it! I was only twenty-two years old at the time and let it all happen because I thought that was the way it ought to happen. You came home empty - handed and the child’s bedroom had already been cleared and everything was soon business as usual (Faro 2011, 7).

Most of the times, these stillborn children were commemorated within the family and in private places and did not belong to public commemoration. The dedication of a monument to stillborn children in 2001, in the Dutch village of Reutum, caused an avalanche of attention in the public media. The affair was thus taken from private commemoration, to commemoration in the public area.

The initiative to this first monument was taken by Jan Kerkhof Jonkman, a Roman Catholic deacon in the village of Reutum in the eastern part of the Netherlands. He remembers that when he was a child, his father had to go to the unconsecrated grounds of the graveyard to bury himself his stillborn sister. The Roman Catholic priest did not care for her because she had not been baptized. He still remembers the sorrow of his parents. At All Souls in the catholic Holy Year 2000, which carried the theme *mea culpa*, he decided to consecrate the place where stillborn children had been buried at the time. While he was doing so, a woman stepped forward and put a burning candle in the ground stating that this apparently must be the place where her stillborn child was buried long time ago. She was soon followed by others and Kerkhof Jonkman thought it was more appropriate to have a monument erected at this particular place; it would be impossible to reverse the past but it would be possible to do justice to the grief. A monument would act as a symbol in this respect.<sup>2</sup> The monument has generally been indicated to be the “first monument to stillborn children” in

<sup>1</sup> Documentary on the Neonatology Unit of the Academic Hospital in Groningen, the Netherlands *Als we het zouden weten* (2008), Petra Lataster – Czisch and Peter Lataster, <http://www.hollanddoc.nl/kijk-luister/documentaire/a/als-we-het-zouden-weten0.html>, accessed August 1, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Deze kinderen zijn naamloos, dat mag niet’, interview with Jan Kerkhof Jonkman, [www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/5009/Archief/archief/article/detail/2529428/2000/06/30/Deze-kinderen-zijn-naamloos-dat-mag-niet-.dhtml](http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/5009/Archief/archief/article/detail/2529428/2000/06/30/Deze-kinderen-zijn-naamloos-dat-mag-niet-.dhtml) , accessed August 14, 2013.

the Netherlands although there seem to be ‘older’ monuments (Kok 2005, 66).<sup>3</sup> The monument in Reutum meant the start of a public debate about the practices around stillborn children at the time. Since that time, in many other cities and villages people took the initiative to erect monuments. It is difficult to determine the number exactly because there is no central organization or system keeping track of the number. However, the Dutch anthropologist Janneke Peelen states that in total the number of monuments in the Netherlands must be around 160 (Peelen 2009, 51).

## Methods

### *Theoretical notes on ritual, memory and place*

This contribution is based on the results of the PhD project of the author (Faro 2015). This exploratory and qualitative PhD project has primarily been embedded in the field of ritual studies. Within this field, ritual commemoration practices, closely connected to a monument, belong to “an emerging ritual repertoire” (Post, Molendijk & Kroesen 2011, 8, 36-37, 45-46). A ritual is a “more or less repeatable sequence of action units which, take on a symbolic dimension through formalization, stylization and their situation in place and time” (Post et al. 2011, 18). One of the pioneers in ritual studies, Ronald Grimes holds the opinion that “the meaning of ‘ritual’ depends on the context” (Grimes 2014, 185). Scholars usually distinguish between meaning and function, and they currently debate whether rituals mean anything as well as whether they ‘do’ anything, that is whether they have a function. According to Grimes rituals both do and mean something: they ‘work’ by making meaning (Grimes 2014, 325-328). People who participate in the context of commemoration of a person or an event may feel that this is a meaningful process to them personally. Besides this personal aspect, rituals may “bear, carry, or conjure meaning” to a wider audience (Grimes 2014, 318).

In *Multidirectional Memory* the American scholar in memory studies Michael Rothberg explores the ‘minimalist’ definition of memory as proposed by Richard Terdiman in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*: “memory is the past made present” (Rothberg 2009, 3-4). Rothberg comments that the notion of a ‘making present’ has two implications. A first one is that memory is not something of the past but a contemporary phenomenon: while concerned with the past memory happens in the present. In this project there is a connection between persons or events of the past and remembering them in the present by means of a monument. A second observation is that memory is ‘a form of work’, people who remember act through interventions and ritual practices at particular places, for instance by means of erecting a monument and commemoration rituals at the site of a monument.

As acknowledged by the Dutch ritual specialist Paul Post, and in line with the American religious scholar Jonathan Smith, “place matters”, very often it is place which directs rituality and in our contemporary society, ritual place has become an important theme (Post 2010, 76-83, Smith 1987). In addition the American philosopher Edward Casey emphasizes the relationship between ‘memory’ and ‘place’: “a memory is often either of a place itself or of an event or person *in* a place [...]” (Casey 2000, 183). Casey holds the opinion that memory is naturally ‘place-oriented’ or at least ‘place-supported’. Memory itself is a place wherein the past can revive and survive (Casey 2000, 187).

Casey declares place to be “the first of all things” which seems to be in line with the mentioned relevance of place regarding ritual practices. The actual location, the place, of a monument constitutes the connection between a person

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<sup>3</sup> The Dutch author H. Kok indicates in *Thanatos*, his book on funeral rituals, that a monument to children who died without being baptized was raised at the Catholic cemetery in the Dutch town of Zwolle in 1991: *Thanatos* 2005, 66. This monument did not get much attention in the media at the time of erection, and it might very well be that other monuments have been erected without getting any media attention and which have thus remained beyond sight.

or an event in the past, and 'place' in the present. In addition, ritual practices reinforce this bond between memory and place.

Casey states that through the 'work' of commemoration the past does not just disappear in the present, but instead only traverses the present on its way to becoming future: '[...]. It is the creating of memorializations in the media of ritual, text, and psyche; it enables us to honour the past by carrying it intact into new and lasting forms of alliance and participation' (Casey 2000, 257).

In this respect the past, present and the future of the memory of a stillborn child are connected by means of a monument and ritual commemoration practices at these sites.

#### *Purpose of the research*

The focus of this research in the field of ritual studies was on parents who have kept for a long time commemoration of their stillborn child within a private context. With the emergence as of 2001 of monuments to stillborn children they now have the opportunity to enact commemoration rituals in honour of their stillborn child in public and to share their individual memories with a wider audience.

The purpose of the research was to study how collective and individual commemoration rituals enacted by parents at the site of a monument create meaning in coming to terms with the, often long time ago, loss of a stillborn child.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

Qualitative methods of data collection have been used in this research. In total twenty five interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2011 with parents, initiators to monuments, artists, health care professionals, undertakers and employees of graveyards, representatives of the church and local municipality.

Through analysis of the empirical data acquired by these interviews, the behaviour, goals, habits and context of parents of a stillborn child have been explored thereby focusing how they communicate, what information they impart, and use, what decisions they make, and which emotions are involved regarding commemoration practices.

#### **Setup of this contribution**

I will start this contribution with a discussion of relevant issues within the individual, social and ritual context of these parents, like mourning practices, ritual practices, and medical practices regarding stillborn children in the years 1950-1990 and I will consider how they relate to the erection of monuments and ritual commemoration practices much later, that is to say as of the year 2001. The religious issues within the Roman Catholic Church will be discussed with an accent on experiences of Roman Catholic parents in the (mainly catholic) province of Noord-Brabant.

Next the focus will shift to the exploration of the origin and meaning of one monument to stillborn children in particular, a monument in the city of Roermond. The contribution will be rounded off with a conclusion on the results.

## Grief and mourning practices over stillborn children

Children who die around their birth are usually called ‘stillborn’ children.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly in this contribution stillborn children are children who died before, during or shortly after birth. Up to the years mid eighty of the previous century, health care professionals like doctors, midwives and nurses determined routines around birth. As a consequence and according to the protocols at the time, stillborn children were immediately taken away after birth. Mothers most often did not get a chance, nor were they allowed seeing their child. Fathers sometimes were able to catch a glimpse before the child was taken away.

Gynaecologists in hospitals were taught during their training that it was best not induce emotions by acquainting the parents with their stillborn child because it would be more difficult for them to handle their loss once they had become attached, seen and held, their child. Other doctors like general practitioners, who attended deliveries at the residences of parents, adopted these routines. The American scholar Linda Layne in her account on pregnancy loss in America cites doctor Michael Berman who reports in *Parenthood loss: healing the pain after miscarriage, stillbirth and infant death* (Westport 2001, xvii) that he was instructed during his obstetrical training in the years seventy of the twentieth century:

[...] that if a child was stillborn or with a serious, ‘unsightly’ birth defect, the physician should attempt to protect the parents from the ‘shock’ of seeing their dead child by covering it with a blanket, quickly removing it from the delivery area, and sending the body to the morgue to be buried in an unmarked grave (Layne 2003, 223).

The words of a mother about her stillborn child: “and that was it”, as clarified in the introduction of this contribution, indicate that parents were not openly allowed to grieve and they were almost ‘forced’ to ‘deny’ and ‘ignore’ their stillborn child as if it had not existed at all. Health care professionals as well as family and friends thought it was best to silence the stillborn child.

At the end of the years sixty of the nineteenth century, attention was given for the first time to the process of grieving of stillborn children (Bourne 1968). In the Netherlands the first results on scientific research concerning the best way to take care of parents of stillborn children were published in the years eighty of the twentieth century (Lambers 1980; Hohenbruck, de Kleine, Kollee & Robbroeckx 1985; Keirse 1989). It was at that time that health care professionals started to be aware of the fact that the relationship and bonding between a parent and a child already started before birth. New approaches were developed to take care of the parents and their stillborn child and the parents were informed about these approaches by means of patient education materials.<sup>5</sup> It was advised not to take away the child immediately after birth. Immediate confrontation and acquaintance with their child became part of the mourning process. It meant that parents were allowed to see their child, to hug it and to take care of it. Organizing a funeral with accompanying rituals became also part of the bereavement and mourning process. Coming to terms with the loss should be done by going through remembrances of the child. For that reason it was considered important to actually ‘create’ remembrances in the short time between the child’s birth and its funeral. Nowadays pictures and footprints are made, or a piece of hair is kept, all matters to realize at a later time that the child really existed. These are exactly those matters doctors, midwives and nurses opposed to until the mid eighties of the previous century because they thought the

<sup>4</sup> In this contribution, I will follow the definition of stillbirth as currently used by the Nederlandse Vereniging voor Obstetrie en Gynaecologie (Society of Dutch obstetricians and gynaecologists) in their patient education brochure on the loss of a child during pregnancy or during birth. In this brochure stillbirth is defined as: ‘the birth of a child who died during pregnancy (so called intra uterine death of foetus) or around birth’; [www.nvog.nl/voorlichting/NVOG+Voorlichtingsbrochures/default.aspx](http://www.nvog.nl/voorlichting/NVOG+Voorlichtingsbrochures/default.aspx), Het verlies van een kind tijdens de zwangerschap of rond de bevalling, par. 2.1: Doodgeboorte, accessed August 14, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> [www.nvog.nl/voorlichting/NVOG+Voorlichtingsbrochures/default.aspx](http://www.nvog.nl/voorlichting/NVOG+Voorlichtingsbrochures/default.aspx), accessed August 14, 2013.

emotional effects would be counterproductive to the emotional wellbeing of the parents. The loss of a child at birth was considered to be a medical setback or complication instead of a human tragedy (Lovell 1983).

## **Analysis of the interviews with Roman Catholic parents in the province of Noord – Brabant**

### *Introduction*

In particular a great number of monuments have been erected in the southern provinces of the Netherlands: Noord – Brabant and Limburg. From way back, these provinces hold a catholic identity (Bernts, de Jong & Yar 2006, 92-93). More than eighty five percent of the monuments, around 135, have been erected at Roman Catholic graveyards or near Roman Catholic Churches in these two provinces. For reasons to explain, the monuments have been erected honouring stillborn children who were buried anonymously at these cemeteries at hideaway places, like under a hedge or at the unconsecrated grounds (Peelen 2009, 173-186; Faro 2011; Peelen 2011). Without any doubt the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on parents of stillborn children has been important. For this reason I conducted interviews with parents (two widows, one single mother and one couple) who experienced the loss of their child and were not allowed having a catholic funeral for their child. My focus during these interviews was on the consequences of not knowing of the whereabouts of their child, and on the (emotional) impact of burial of the child in hideaway places.

But first I will start with a short introduction on the applicable Roman Catholic rules and regulations on stillborn children.

### *Baptism*

The rules of law of the Roman Catholic Church, the Code of Canon Law, of 1917 determined that people who had not been baptized could not have a religious funeral.<sup>6</sup> It may be deduced from this rule of canonical law that people, who had not been baptized, like stillborn children, were not entitled to a grave in the consecrated grounds of a catholic graveyard. Consequently, these little children had to be buried secretly and anonymously in the unconsecrated grounds of the graveyard. It was doubted by representatives of the Roman Catholic Church whether the souls of these children could go to heaven.

The traditional Roman Catholic doctrine regarding this matter was based on the theory of the so called '*limbo*' which refers to a sort of 'space in - between' where these children would go to. In 2007 the International Theological Commission, one of the Pontifical Commissions of the Roman Curia, explains the concept of '*limbo*' as follows:

a state which includes the souls of infants who die subject to original sin and without baptism, and who, therefore, neither merit the beatific vision, nor yet are subjected to any punishment, because they are not guilty of any personal sin.<sup>7</sup>

Children who have not been baptized are in a state in which they have no access to the blessings of heaven and the vision of god. Because of their very young age, it is impossible that they have committed any individual sin, it may be assumed that they will go without punishment and will not have to go to hell. However, they will have to remain in this 'space in - between'. The concept of '*limbo*' does not have a clear foundation in the bible, but has been used for ages by

<sup>6</sup> Code of Canon Law 1917; CIC 1239 par. 1.

<sup>7</sup> International Theological Commission: *The hope of salvation for infants who die without being baptized*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070419\\_un-baptised-infants\\_en](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en) , accessed August 15, 2013.  
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the Roman Catholic Church as a doctrine.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, the Roman Catholic Church officially discarded of the concept of *limbo*. As a result it is now assumed that God will save these children, exactly because it has not been possible to do what was necessary to do for them, that is, to have them baptized.<sup>9</sup>

Around the mid fifties of the twentieth century, observance of the rules of baptism became less strict. Many priests began applying the principle of the so called ‘baptism of desire’ which meant that if they considered the parents of the stillborn child to be ‘good Catholics’, and they would for sure have had their child baptized had it stayed alive, the child could be considered to have received the baptism and thus it was allowed to have the child buried in consecrated ground.

Only in 1983, the Code of Canon Law was changed and an article was admitted about the burial of un-baptized children: a local priest may allow children who died without having been baptized a religious funeral if their parents had the intention to have them baptized.<sup>10</sup>

This means that ‘officially’, as of 1983, stillborn children were allowed to be buried in the consecrated ground. In the period between the mid years fifty of the twentieth century and 1983, a burial in consecrated ground depended on local priests and their opinion on the catholic practices and attitude of the parents with regard to any application of the ‘baptism of desire’.

Many parents must have been hurt by these ‘rules’. On top of the emotions caused by the death of their child, they were touched by the fact that their un-baptized child would not have access to the blessings of heaven and could not have a religious funeral with the accompanying rituals.

## Results

One of the parents I interviewed, a Roman Catholic widow, eighty-three years old at the time of the interview, told me about the delivery of her first child in 1953:

*It was a terrible delivery. They had to push on my stomach to get the child out. When he finally came out, he was dead. He had the umbilical cord around his neck, they told me. The doctor and a nun, who was a nurse, told me that they thought it was better if I did not see the child. At that time you did not dare to ask why. You looked up to doctors and nuns. Maybe we listened too much to them. My husband has regretted that very much, but that is how it was at that time. I was crying very much and they thought I could not handle it. My husband finally got a glimpse of the child. He told me that it was a boy and that he had beautiful hair and little nails.*

<sup>8</sup> International Theological Commission: *The hope of salvation for infants who die without being baptised*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070419\\_un-baptised-infants\\_en](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en) , accessed August 15, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> This report received the approval of the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, on January 19, 2007 and accordingly the text could be published.

The conclusion of this report was as follows:

The conclusion of this study is that there are theological and liturgical reasons to hope that infants who die without baptism may be saved and brought into eternal happiness, even if there is not an explicit teaching on this question found in Revelation [...] Rather, there are reasons to hope that God will save these infants precisely because it was not possible to do for them that what would have been most desirable— to baptize them in the faith of the Church and incorporate them visibly into the Body of Christ.

International Theological Commission: *The hope of salvation for infants who die without being baptised*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070419\\_un-baptised-infants\\_en](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en) , accessed August 15, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Code of Canon Law 1983: CIC 1183 par. 2.

She has never known what happened to the little boy. A nun told her that the boy had received the baptism of desire and had been put in a coffin with a mother who had just died. They were buried at a catholic cemetery: “But I doubt that. Could that really be true? Does the family of that mother know that our boy was put in her coffin?”

She had to stay in the hospital for six days and she was put on a ward with all happy mothers with healthy children. Afterwards nobody wanted to talk about it anymore. She had other healthy children afterwards. When the children were young she had been too busy to give it much thought but nowadays she thinks of the little boy a lot. She regrets that they did not give him an official name. Every time she visits her husband’s grave she wonders where the little boy is and she would very much like to know that. She thought that she had come to terms, after fifty-six years, with the loss but she starts to cry when she tells me:

*It returns every time, I get very sad and I have to cry even after such a long time. It comforts me a lot that this issue gets much attention now and that I am able to tell you the story. I visited the monument at Orthen<sup>11</sup>, very nice, it offers support.*

Her testimony is supported by other parents. A woman (eighty-seven years old at the time of the interview) told me about her first child which was stillborn in 1951:

*Unfortunately it had already died and was in a state of decomposition. They would not allow me to see it but I insisted and they finally let me see it. At night my husband put the child in a shoe box and he took it to the verger. The verger buried the child under a hedge at the unconsecrated ground of the cemetery. That’s how things were at that time. Of course I was feeling sad, it happened to everybody but you never talked about it.*

In the years after, they got two healthy children and then she got pregnant again. This child, a little girl was born in the hospital and died soon after birth:

*The nuns took care of the burial. They told me they put her in a coffin with somebody else. We did not worry about anything, it was like that at the time, you had to go on. We were busy at home, there were other children and we had a successful business. The nuns made us pay for the burial.*

In 1960 she lost one of the twin boys that were born prematurely. She has accepted the loss of their three children although she had been sad at the time: it was very normal at the time, every week, a child died somewhere.

They were present at the dedication of a monument for stillborn children in their village and considered this monument as a kind of ‘closing’ of the loss of their unbaptized children.

Another parent (a single woman, age sixty-nine at the time of the interview) told me that when she was nineteen years old, she was living in a home for orphan girls. In 1958, she met a boy and she got pregnant. They planned to marry and she would have the child in a catholic home for unmarried pregnant women. Due to complications, she had to go to hospital for the delivery of her child. Unfortunately the child died during a Caesarean section. Her future mother in law got to see the child, but did not allow her to see the girl:

*She told me it would be better if I did not see her, she said that the child was mutilated by the section, although the nurses offered to let me see her. They told me they put her in a coffin with another dead body. I did not have the money to give her a funeral and my parents in law did not want to pay. Nobody told me anything and there was no one to speak to.*

<sup>11</sup> Orthen is a local cemetery in the Dutch city of Den Bosch.



Afterwards she got two healthy sons. She finally broke up with her husband and she was never really capable to cope with the death of her first child. She regrets the fact that she did not insist to see her. Now she has no material memories of her:

*I kept thinking that maybe she was not dead at all. Maybe they handed her over for adoption? I think this happened before in that home when parents did not want their child. A couple of years ago, my youngest son wrote a letter to the hospital and asked for the medical file of Peggy. Now I have the proof that she existed and that she died.*

She has her own little ‘monument’ and her own rituals which bring her a lot of comfort. She put a little statue on the cabinet, next to a sculpture of Joseph, Maria and Jesus. She gets very emotional when she explains: “They watch Peggy and they will guard her”.

Another parent, a widow, sixty-nine years old, told me that in May 1961, when she was twenty-one years old, her first daughter, Marion, was stillborn:

*After nine months pregnancy I told my husband that I did not feel the child anymore. I thought that was normal and the doctor also told me everything was okay. I had contractions from Tuesday till Thursday when finally Saturday the child came. But it had already died. They let me see her because it was with us for another hour. I was not allowed to touch her because that was contagious they said. We did not know what to do. The doctor told us to put it in a box. It stood till Monday at the neighbours’ when it was finally buried secretly, like a dog. At the place where they put all stillborn children. My husband did not go, he did not want to leave me alone.*

She feels that, if after all those years, she has not coped with her loss. She has to cry often and also when she is telling her story: “I do not know exactly where Marion was buried. They indicated the place but I do not know exactly. I could not hold my little child and I mind that a lot. Also that it did not have a proper coffin but only a box”.

She is very disappointed in the Roman Catholic Church and its priests. She thinks that both she and her husband were good practicing parishioners but neither when Marion died, nor when her own husband died did she get any support from them. She feels very comforted by the monument at the graveyard of Erp. She thinks it is a beautiful place: “I go there regularly to put flowers, and then I think of her, and also on Marion’s birthday”.

### **Regrets, worries, anger**

Parents mention the fact that they were not allowed to hold or even see their stillborn child. They have no material memories of their child and they blame the (catholic) doctors and nurses (mostly nuns) for not allowing them to attach themselves to their child. On the other hand: they also blame themselves for not having contradicted, and resigning to the situation. This anger and regret still upsets them all.

Parents mention that they find it extremely difficult not to know what has happened to their child. They keep worrying and wondering what has happened at the time of the stillbirth: has the child really been buried in a coffin with someone else? They find this hard to believe. The fact that they do not have a place to go to, to visit and to pay respect to their child, makes it difficult, even after such a long time, to come to terms with the loss.

Parents are hurt by the fact that nobody wanted to talk about their stillborn child. Nobody supported them in their grief and they felt that the child was disregarded, maybe not by their close relatives but by others, in particular by representatives from the Roman Catholic Church.

Parents are still very emotional and they do not seem to have coped with the loss of their stillborn child. It seems, now that they have become older and life has become ‘less’ busy, everything, so to say, ‘comes back’ and causes a lot of

emotions. They are still very emotional about the disrespect they have all felt at the time from the Roman Catholic Church.

A place to commemorate seems to bring comfort, either private or public. Public debate also offers support and monuments to stillborn children are considered as justice and honour being done their children. They do not make up for all the harm that has been done: they continue to blame the Roman Catholic Church very much for the shame done to children, in particular when they have been buried in unconsecrated ground.

## **Analysis of the interviews with parents related to the monument to stillborn children in the city of Roermond**

### *Introduction*

I will now focus on one monument in particular as an example how these monuments and accompanying commemoration rituals create meaning to parents of stillborn children. In my PhD research I studied different monuments (Faro 2015). The monument discussed in this contribution may serve as an example of the process of meaning making by means of commemoration rituals at the site of a monument.

On June 18, 2008, a monument was unveiled in the Dutch city of Roermond: Het monument voor het doodgeboren kind (Monument to the stillborn child) at the cemetery Tussen de Bergen. The monument is made up of three parts:

1. 'Stones of thought', symbolizing the children;
2. A 'boat' made of bronze, symbolizing the parents;
3. A 'gate', symbolizing the gate of the hereafter.

The artists, designed a monument in which parents and other people involved, may actively contribute with a commemoration ritual by putting a so called 'stone of thought' into the monument.<sup>12</sup> These stones are blown of glass and may have an individually designed inscription.

One of the artists, Coco-Susanne van Wijk, explains that the stones of thought will be put into the boat thereby symbolizing the parents who will carry their children through the gate of the hereafter, a journey they will make together. When the sun will be shining on the boat, through the holes of the boat, the stones will twinkle in the light as if the children are dancing in the sunlight, embraced by their parents. A commemorative inscription at the foot of the monument bears the following inscription: *Fonkelend in het licht. In een landschap van gedachten* (Twinkling in the light. In a landscape of thoughts). The monument symbolizes the long road of parents who have grieved so much about the loss of their children and in combination with its location symbolizes an imaginary 'landscape of thoughts'.

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<sup>12</sup> The locally well-known artist Dick van Wijk (1943) and his daughter Coco-Susanne van Wijk (1981). Dick van Wijk also designed the Nationaal Indië-monument 1945 – 1962 in Roermond.



Photo 1. Monument to the stillborn child. (Photo: Laurentius Ziekenhuis, Roermond, 2008)

#### *Initiative to the monument*

The initiative to this monument was taken in 2006 by Mrs. Betsy Muler – Kouters. In the month of May of that year, she wrote a letter to director of the local Roermond hospital, the Laurentius Ziekenhuis.<sup>13</sup> In this letter she explained that recently she had been talking a lot with her parents, Mrs. and Mr. Kouters, both eighty-six years old about their stillborn son who was born in 1964. He was the last of fourteen pregnancies of her mother. She had five miscarriages, one child died at six weeks and seven children were still alive. Now that her parents had become older, Mrs. Muler noticed that they were more and more wondering what had happened at the time to their last, stillborn boy. The only thing they could still remember is that he was immediately taken away and that they only caught a glimpse of him. Her father had run after the doctor and asked if he could be baptized. They have never known whether this has happened nor were they told what happened to the body. Even after all that time, it kept them busy a lot and they were still very emotional.

Mrs. Muler asked the director in her letter whether he was able to retrieve from the medical archives, information on the little boy and about what had happened to his remains. In his answer the director of the Laurentius Ziekenhuis explained that unfortunately all medical files of that period had been destroyed due to legal regulations which allowed them to do so. At that time, general procedure regarding stillborn children was that these children would be cremated, but due to the long period of time, much information on the exact procedures had been lost.

In her answer Mrs. Muler suggested that the hospital would initiate a “place of commemoration” honouring all those stillborn children who had been cremated by the hospital without any proper funeral ritual and without informing the

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication Betsy Muler – Kouters, June 26, 2011, documentation in possession of researcher. Mrs. Muler consented in publishing these data and in publishing her name.

parents. Mrs. Muler proposed that the seventy fifth anniversary of the hospital that year would be the right moment to make good what the hospital had done to all those parents and also to make a new start for the upcoming seventy-five years. This proposal was adopted by the hospital management and on June 18 of 2008 the dedication ceremony of the monument took place.

At the dedication ceremony, six ‘stones of thought’ were put into the boat and the first one was put by Mrs. Betsy Muler – Kouters, on behalf of her parents and brothers and sisters.



Photo 2. Mrs. Betsy Muler – Kouters and Benjamin's stone of thought. (Photo: Laurentius Ziekenhuis, Roermond, 2008.)

Unfortunately her father had already died and her mother was unable to attend due to physical problems. However, Mrs. Muler informed me that her father had known about her initiative and the response of the hospital. He had liked that very much.<sup>14</sup> Together with her brothers and sisters they thought of an inscription to put on the stone. They also had to think of a name because their parents never had the chance to give their stillborn son a name. They named him Benjamin because he had been their youngest brother. Because his death was considered as the ‘cause’ of the monument, they decided on the following text: ‘Your stillbirth has not been meaningless for everything has a reason’.<sup>15</sup> One of the sisters of Mrs. Muler, Mrs. Door Jacobs – Kouters, explained:

*The most wonderful thing of that day was when at the dedication ceremony a little girl sang ‘Heaven’, at that moment there was a little breeze and little blossom flowers fell down on all people present, it was just like a sign from heaven, sent by all those little children from that time as if they sent us a message that they were all well. That could not be a coincidence. Very, very nice!! It was very emotional. I often have to think about it and then I say: “Goodbye little brother, I have never seen you but this was well done by you”.*

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Mrs. Muler – Kouters, August 1, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Benjamin Kouters 1 augustus 1964 ‘Jouw doodgeboorte was niet zinloos, want alles heeft een reden’.

After the ceremony that had given their mother a detailed report on the event. She was touched and it clearly seemed to do her well, according to Mrs. Muler – Kouters.

The other stones were placed by the Laurentius hospital, by representatives of the Community Council of Roermond, by pupils of a local elementary school and by two other parents of stillborn children.

Photo 3. (on the right) Stones of thought. (Photo: Laurentius Ziekenhuis, 2008.)



### **Finding the parents**

In 2011, I made efforts to trace the names of the other parents who had laid a stone of thought. I asked the hospital if they could assist me in getting in touch with them and if they would agree to an interview. The hospital stated that they were, due to privacy regulations, not able to do so. Instead they helped me with a publication in a local newspaper and at a later moment I had an interview with a journalist from a regional newspaper who published an article in which I was able

to make a call for participants. I got a lot of reactions, very emotional letters of parents from all over the country, who all had lost one, or sometimes several children during birth and who had, for several reasons, not been able to see, hold, or bury their child.

Only Mrs. Muler-Kouters and her sister responded to my call. Unfortunately, none of the parent(s) who had put a stone into the monument responded. Indirectly I was able to trace one mother who had ordered a stone but, for reasons to explain, did not put it into the monument. She agreed to an interview which took place on March, 25 2011. She agreed to anonymous publication of the data, I will therefore continue in calling her ‘Mrs. V’.

### *Background of Mrs. V*

At the time of the interview in 2011, Mrs. V was seventy-nine years old. Her husband died a couple of years ago. They were married in 1951. In 1952 her first child, a girl, was born. In 1954, she got pregnant again. At six months pregnancy, at the second day of Christmas, the child, a girl, was born in the Laurentius hospital in Roermond. Mrs. V heard her cry: “I heard her cry and it was very nice because most of the times you are not allowed to see the child but there was a very nice nun who said to me: you must have a look, and then they took it away, crying”. Next day they were told by a young nurse that the child had died. Nobody offered comfort or support. She was in a ward with other mothers who all had healthy children: “I was very jealous of them and I was mad at myself because my body had rejected my child”. They were not allowed to see the child again to say goodbye, nor were they told what happened to her.

They were not catholic so there was no discussion whether the child would have been baptized. After she got home again, nobody spoke about what happened. In 1957 a son was born and in 1960 she got another daughter.

### *Emotions*

For years, Mrs. V has been wondering what happened to the child and why they were not allowed to say goodbye to her: “It is so cruel because you feel like a mother to her, it was very much wanted. I have seen it, a moment, it had a lot of hair and the forehead of my husband”. She had wanted very much to say goodbye to her:

*When I heard her cry, it was a sign to me that she wanted to stay with me but they took her away. I was not able to hold her, neither when she had died, nor give her a little kiss. To say goodbye to someone who died: do it, do it because it will bother you forever if you don't. That feeling will stay with you forever. You had to let the child go, they took it away from you. Just like you did not want the child.*

Her husband never wanted to talk about the child and she does not know why:

*Maybe my husband has seen her [...] I have been looking for years to find out what happened to her and where she was...at the churchyard? Maybe he knew what happened to her, he did not want to talk about it although he knew I felt so sad. I wondered why he did not want me to talk about it. Where is that child? He thought you should not speak about these things [...] The only person I could speak to was my mother. My mother went through the same, she also had a stillborn child, but she lived far away and we did not have a telephone at the time.*

They told her that if her stillborn child would not be spoken about, her grief would be less: “They said all the time: if you keep quiet about it, you will have less distress”. She also feels uncomfortable about the feelings she had at the time towards mothers with healthy, living children and also because nowadays everything has been so well organized when you have a stillborn child: “For years I have been at odds with myself because of my feelings at the time, I had remorse”.

### *The monument in Roermond*

She learned about the monument by an article in a local newspaper and she attended the dedication ceremony. Her daughter accompanied her and she enjoyed the ceremony very much: “I walk around the cemetery once in a while and then I think it would have been nice if there was something to go to, now there is this monument to visit [...] They should have one at every cemetery”.

After the dedication ceremony she decided to have her own stone of thought. She devised the following text: “Dear child, forever in my thoughts, December 26 1954”. Instead of laying the stone in the monument, she took it home:

*I picked it up at the hospital, which was already something of a ritual. It was very neatly packed and when I came home I carefully unpacked it and put it next to the pictures of my husband and a good friend and I told them: Boys, remember, this is a very small child, you will have to take care of it. And in my thoughts I can hear them nod that they agree.*

Mrs. V thinks that the symbolism of, what she calls, the ‘boat of life’ and the gate of heaven is very nice and emotional but she does not want to have her own stone in the monument. She fears that it may get dirty or that other stones will be put on her own stone: “Maybe sand will come over it or they will put stones on top of it”.

The ritual of collecting the stone was as if she was collecting her own child from the hospital: “I was all alone, on purpose. It was something between that little child and me, now it is returning to me”.

Before she had the stone of thought, she thought of the child almost every day, especially on the day of her birth and death, the twenty sixth of December and now, with the stone:

*I am finally there; I have always had a knot in my body but it has gone. Really. There are many days now that I do not think of it [...] I am now able to close up, just like with your husband, not like you forget them, but it has now settled. It was the same with the little stone, I am very happy with it. I showed it to many people and they all thought it was very nice. Some ask about it when they notice it. It did me well, so did this interview.*

#### *The monument in 2013*

At the time of writing the text of my PhD thesis in 2013, I again made contact with the hospital about the present state of the monument. I was particularly interested to learn whether additional stones had been put into the monument. They told me they were not aware of any additional stones.

I contacted Mrs. Muler and asked her about her present feelings on the monument. She told me that she had visited the monument with her sister at the birthday of her brother Benjamin. At that moment she counted ten stones of thought in the monument. They were difficult to see because a glass plate (with two big locks) had been placed above the stones. Also, the stones were covered with leaves, dirt and sand. It seemed that they needed to be cleaned according to Mrs. Muler.<sup>16</sup>

#### **The meaning of the monument in Roermond**

The Laurentius hospital very actively participated in its erection. When parents ask the hospital about what happened to their stillborn children at the time, the hospital has to explain that apparently these children have been cremated and no records have been kept. The hospital emphasizes that they feel in a way responsible for what happened at the time. They want to continue this bond with the parents in the future. However, they do not seem to be aware what happens at the place of commemoration or what meaning parents of stillborn children attribute to the monument. For instance they are not aware of the reason why Mrs. V did not want to put her stone of thought into the monument. Mrs. V wanted to bring her child 'home' which she did by means of the stone and does not need a public place of commemoration. The ritual of bringing home the stone brings comfort; finally her grieving has stopped.

I was only able to speak to two persons with a stone of thought. To them the monument and commemoration rituals created a meaningful place to finally coming to terms with the loss of their stillborn children. These conclusions are confirmed by the results of the research I conducted on other monuments to stillborn children in the Netherlands, for instance the monument in the city of Sittard, and the monument in the city of Nijmegen (Faro 2013; Faro 2015).

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, August 7, 2013.



Photo 4. Het monument Een glimlach kwam voorbij, in the city of Sittard (Photo: Laurie M.C. Faro, 2011.)

## Conclusions

The focus of this contribution was on parents who have for a long time kept commemoration of their stillborn child within a private context. With the emergence as of 2001 of monuments to stillborn children, many of them enact commemoration rituals at a monument.

The results of the exploration of the individual context of these parents show that most of them still very much regret that they were prohibited by medical and religious practice at the time to create an emotional bond with their stillborn child. They blame themselves for not having strongly objected to this denial of the parent – child relationship. Most of them still worry about what has happened to their stillborn child who, most of the time was anonymously cremated or buried at an unknown place. They had been denied any commemorative (religious) ritual ceremony.

They all feel that their stillborn child has been silenced and disregarded because at the time it was thought best never to speak about the child again, and instead focus on other children who could be born in good health in the years after. The social context was thus one of ignoring, in particular emotional, issues with regard to stillborn children.

Regrets, worries, silence and disregard of their stillborn child, all contribute to a release of emotions, even many years after the stillbirth of their child. In particular when any other children start to raise families, the memories of their own worries during pregnancy and birth seem to return. Moreover, emotions are unlocked when they experience the difference regarding the current approach to stillborn children: why were they not allowed to bond with their stillborn child and give it a proper farewell ritual?



Regarding the function and meaning of monuments to stillborn children, the following may be concluded. The results of the research show that a ritual place, like a monument, may 'work' in the process of coming to terms with the loss, even long-time ago of a stillborn child. This might explain why in my research, one of the parent's main worry was about the whereabouts of their children as they were searching for a place 'where the past could revive and survive', in terms of Casey (Casey 2000, 187). A monument may offer such a place instead, when no tomb stone is available, a place for ritual commemoration practices, which may accordingly help out in the process of handling the loss, even many years after the stillbirth of the child.

### Biographical note

Laurie M.C. Faro is a researcher in Tilburg University, School of Humanities. She has a background in Culture Studies and has recently finished a (PhD) research project focusing on the context and meaning of 'postponed' monuments as a separate category within Dutch monument culture. 'Postponed' monuments are monuments erected a long time after the event or disaster to be commemorated took place. This study is a qualitative exploration within the field of ritual studies. This contribution is based on the results of one of the case studies explored within the context of the PhD study. Contact: l.m.c.faro@uvt.nl.

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