seriously, unusual claims require unusually strong supporting evidence, and the onus is on the expo-
- nents of SHC to prove the phenomenon beyond reasonable doubt. Until then, it seems prudent to
follow the dictum of Occam’s razor, which coun-
- sels acceptance of the simplest, most parsimonious
- explanation. Moreover, it is known that stories
- lending themselves to a dramatic interpretation,
such as an unusual and gruesome death, are often
developed in this direction in the telling. Hence, until
a mechanism is proven for human self-ignition, it
seems reasonable to assume that an external source
is responsible.

Anna Madill

See also Accidental Death; Cremation; Forensic Science;
- Homicide; Literary Depictions of Death

Further Readings

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combustibility of the human body. Journal of
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SPONTANEOUS SHRINES

Leaving flowers, candles, teddy bears, hearts, or
cards on sites where people died a violent death
has become a regular practice since the 1990s, at
least in the Western world. In academia, it has
become custom to refer to such commemorative
sites as “spontaneous shrines,” a term coined by
Jack Santino. Murders, traffic deaths, work-re-
lated accidents, terrorist attacks, or disasters of
human or natural origin may trigger people to
bring attributes to the place of mischief in com-
memoration of the deceased. Other deaths that
may evoke similar responses are the deaths of
public figures (celebrities, royalty, politicians),
although spontaneous shrines will generally appear
on places associated with the deceased rather than
on the place of their death.

All spontaneous shrines, whatever the reason of
their taking shape, share the public dimension:

exceptional deaths of ordinary people in the public
domain as well as natural deaths of public people
in the confinement of their private domains are
“public events.” This explains why people without
a formal or personal relationship with the deceased
may feel invited or compelled to express their grief,
anger, or empathy in public. Many of the attributes
that constitute spontaneous shrines are also placed
on graves. However, spontaneous shrines differ
from graves in three important respects. First, there
are no bodies. Second, the public dimension sets
spontaneous shrines and related ritual apart from
funeral ritual, which is usually confined to the inti-
mate sphere of friends and relatives. Third, sponta-
neous shrines arise on neutral, public places that
are not formally reserved for mourning.

Disagreements Over Terminology

Santino chose the adjective spontaneous to high-
light the unofficial nature of the commemorations
performed. No authorities or institutional organi-
zations initiate or encourage the erection of spon-
taneous shrines; instead, such sites result from
people’s personal motivations. Some scholars have
objected that spontaneous shrines are not the out-
come of “instantaneous” impulses, however, and
approach spontaneous shrines as ritualized prac-
tices. In this view, spontaneous shrines, irrespective
their unofficial nature, arise along the lines of what
people deem to be the most appropriate and cus-
tomary response to violent deaths. To avoid misin-
terpretations, scholars often choose other adjectives
instead of spontaneous, most of which emphasize
the transient nature of such sites. Makeshift memo-
rials, ephemeral memorials, or temporal memorials
are other expressions to refer to the same phenom-
- enon, and may also be used in common language.

Approaching these sites as places of communion
between the dead and the living, Santino prefers
the term shrine above memorial. Shrines share this
ability to offer communion with all other material
objects and places that carry memories of the dead.
Therefore, this communal quality is not specifically
restricted to shrines. Monuments, memorials,
and graves also connect the dead with the living
through a physical location. Understanding why
- certain places continue to attract people over long
periods of time while others pass into oblivion
requires social, cultural, religious, and political
contextualization. Many scholars writing on the subject prefer the term *memorial* above *shrine* because the religious connotations of the term may contain the danger of obscuring significant differences in practice, form, and experience with unambiguously religious sites.

**Public Mourning**

Public mourning, of which spontaneous shrines are a contemporary expression, indicates the impact that certain deaths have on society. Deaths that may bring about large-scale public involvement are the deaths of public figures and the multiple deaths of ordinary people in shocking events. The deaths of celebrities, sports stars, singers, or politicians may deeply impress fans or supporters, particularly when perceived as untimely. In the case where a public figure dies a violent death, the societal impact is often broader and more intense, and may inspire more people to participate in the public mourning.

The massive response to the death of Princess Diana in 1997 brought the topic of spontaneous shrines inescapably to the attention of social scientists, journalists, and the wider public. The images of the immense heaps of flowers and the mourning crowds at the gates of Kensington Palace found their way around the globe. Many, including but not limited to British people, wondered how to understand this apparently unprecedented outpour of public grief. As a consequence, the mourning for Princess Diana has been quite extensively researched from a variety of angles. Much writing on spontaneous shrines takes the Princess’ death as a starting point, historically as the first example that set the trend or rhetorically to introduce the subject. An unusual combination of ingredients, that is, the Princess’ high media profile, the bizarre circumstances of her death, the criticism toward the royal family, and the permanent media coverage, added up to a public response of new scale and intensity. Yet spontaneous shrines have occurred earlier, for example, as part of the response to the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme in 1986.

To a certain extent “the public” has always been present in the ritual following upon the death of public figures. Traditionally, the role of the public was rather passive and limited to witnessing the funeral procession. Spontaneous shrines and related ritual are different in resulting from an uninvited, active involvement of private citizens outside any formal protocol.

Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of violent incidents or disasters that brought about the deaths of—smaller or larger—numbers of ordinary people have been commemorated through spontaneous shrines and other public mourning ritual. Examples of events that received worldwide attention were school shootings, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Madrid Trains, and the 2004 Southeast Asia Tsunami. Important for the public to get involved in the mourning is the extent to which a death or multiple deaths attract media attention, and the way the media frame the incident as a societal issue. Spontaneous shrines often coincide with media hype, which is not to say that the sentiments are void or meaningless. Mass media also play a vital role in shaping ritual and disseminating new formats of mourning and commemorating.

**Roadside Memorials**

Most spontaneous shrines are roadside memorials. These memorials for traffic casualties are generally initiated by the victim’s close friends and family, without the involvement of a wider public. Leaving aside accidents that are exceptional in, for instance, the number of deaths, media coverage of traffic tragedies generally remains local and low profile. As a phenomenon, roadside memorials are gaining in importance in many Western countries. Nevertheless, to place this development in proper perspective, it should be kept in mind that roadside memorials are erected for only a fraction of the world’s annual traffic casualties.

Roadside memorials are often interpreted as continuations of Catholic memorial crosses. However, the present-day roadside memorial is not restricted to Catholic areas at all, and there are important differences between the two memorial practices. Memorial crosses were erected for those who had died unexpectedly along the road, and consequently had to appear unprepared before God’s throne. Short texts on the cross encouraged passersby to pray for the salvation of the unfortunate’s soul. Today’s roadside memorials are not based on such theological considerations. Instead, they articulate the increasing experience of traffic
death as unnatural, particularly when it strikes young people. Although frequently used, the cross has for many become rather a sign for death, loosened from its original religious meaning. This demonstrates the need for caution in explaining present-day expressions of mourning as a continuation of earlier practices in a new context.

Many roadside memorials start out as a few bunches of flowers and some candles along the road, demarcating the place of the victim’s death. Yet the effort it takes to maintain a roadside memorial that consists exclusively of ephemeral objects for an extended period of time is a problem that comes with any spontaneous shrine and makes many people turn to more solid solutions. Crosses, slabs of stone, boulders, pebbles, decorated posts, or perennial plants, sometimes in combination with a plaque, are the main constituents of many roadside memorials. In some countries, it has become customary to include the tree against which the victim crashed in the memorial, while elsewhere these trees may become the target of people’s grief and anger, and are cut or damaged.

In order to keep control of the growing number of more or less permanent roadside memorials, many local and national authorities have developed rules and regulations about their size, duration, maintenance, and location. Roadside memorials also evoke objection and aversion. One common objection is that roadside memorials distract the attention of drivers, and therefore are dangerous. Another is that it is disturbing to be confronted unsolicited with death or the sorrow and grief of others. The regulations imposed—restricting diversity and visibility—are often at odds with the desire of the bereaved for an individual, self-styled expression of their emotions. However, in spite of all striving for individuality, roadside memorials are ritualized practices in which an individual touch is but one requirement.

Moreover, when trying to understand the current proliferation of roadside memorials, it is important to realize that the horrendous fact of the daily road deaths and injuries alone does not offer a sufficient explanation. In most Western countries the traffic “death toll” has decreased drastically over the last 30 years. Apparently, popular sentiments are not rooted in statistics. Consequently, roadside mourning and related forms of public commemorative ritual are specific for our era, and therefore should be analyzed in a broader societal context.

**Rituals of Protest**

Spontaneous shrines are part of a broader repertoire of mourning ritual. In many cases, the bereaved, or others who feel involved with the tragedy, hold a wake or service at the memorial site or organize a (silent) march to express their grief and anger. Next to these concrete public performances, web-based condolence registers and virtual memorials also become common elements of the ritual repertoire of public commemoration.

Violent death may happen unpredictably, and the reactions of the public and the subsequent media coverage can be anticipated. Yet, we should not conclude from the similar appearances of such responses in many places of the world that they imply similar intentions or meanings. Behind the shared repertoire lie different worlds of messages, morals, and politics that are deeply embedded in local societies.

Apart from being expressions of mourning, spontaneous shrines are also material articulations of political messages or even protests. In addition to their unorganized “coming into being,” this is another significant dimension in which spontaneous shrines differ from graves and other places that are specifically destined for mourning ritual. Although graves and spontaneous shrines both prolong the social presence of the deceased, in the case of graves this remains limited to the personal perception shared by family and friends (deceased celebrities excepted). Spontaneous shrines are always also material testimonies of the cause of the victim’s death. A spontaneous shrine imposes a more societal or political identity over the deceased’s personal identity, namely that of being a victim of a specific type of social evil or (natural) disaster. By bringing attributes to the place of mischief, signing a condolence register, participating in a wake, or joining a march, the participants make public statements about a specific, contemporary, moral, and political issue. Through the ritual, the participants present themselves to the outside world as a moral community, implicitly excluding the evil ones from this community.

_Irene Stengs_
Stephenson’s Historical Ages of Death in the United States

People collectively construct meanings, images, and rituals for coping with the mystery and inevitability of death. In the United States, as in all societies, these collective images and rituals for coping with death have changed drastically over time. Beginning with the original New England colonies during the 17th century, John Stephenson, in Death, Grief, and Mourning: Individual and Social Realities, demonstrates how the images of death and the rituals associated with death and the dying process proceeded through three stages: the age of sacred death, the age of secular death, and the age of avoided death.

John Stephenson describes how over the last four centuries, the collective meaning of death shifted in the United States. Thus, the collective interpretation of death evolved from a sacred process, embedded in the Puritan eschatology, to a secular process, premised on science. Then, as the U.S. society transitioned into modernity, individuals institutionalized and bureaucratized the dying process while removing it from public life. The three historical ages of death in the United States represent not static points in history, but rather dynamic processes wherein culture and institutions intersect. This entry highlights Stephenson’s assessment of the social processes that influenced the image and rituals of death within each of the three historical ages of death.

Collective Image of Death and Social Processes

Exactly what death means for society is contingent upon the social context. Death is understood in terms of the value system held by members of the social environment. Individual images of death reflect the collective image of death. It is this collective image that defines each historical stage of death in the United States, a collective image that is associated with the social, political, economical, cultural, and demographic context and processes.

Age of the Sacred Death

 Stephenson indicated that the sacred age of death in the United States arose in the Puritan colonies of New England during the early 17th century. The religious meanings associated with death and the dying process caused death to have a sacred meaning. People died as the result of sin, and upon dying, they had to account for their sins on earth. During this stage of death in the United States, people understood why they died and what was to be expected in the afterlife.

Early Puritan society consisted of small, tight-knit communities where religion and family were central to social life. Low life expectancy rates resulted from high rates of disease, occasional epidemics, and poor health care in the colonies. Infant and child mortality rates were high. At least one out of four of the infants who survived their 1st year did not live to see their 10th year. Considering the closeness of the Puritans and the high mortality rates, death rarely went unnoticed. Death was always on public display within everyday life.

Puritan beliefs defined the collective image of death during this period of sacred death. Central to the Puritan doctrine was the notion that only a few people would enter the Kingdom of God, and only God knows of those chosen few. With afterlife predetermined, individuals had no guarantee that they would enter the Kingdom of God upon their death. Thus, death was a source of extreme fear and anxiety. Not only did people fear death, religious doctrine mandated fear. Therefore, the