

**Spontaneous Shrines:
A Modern Response to Tragedy and Disaster**

**(Preliminary Observations Regarding the Spontaneous
Shrines
Following the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001)**

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The hundreds and perhaps thousands of spontaneous shrines which have sprung up in New York City and Washington, D. C., as well as at other sites all over America and the world in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, have attracted the attention of TV viewers and mourners throughout the world. These communal and spontaneous performances of grief are a way for people to work out a personal connection to an otherwise numbing catastrophe and are bringing comfort to thousands and thousands of people during this disaster. In an attempt to help put this new grieving ritual into a broader context, in this essay I would like to share with the scholarly community my knowledge of this increasingly widespread phenomenon, including a brief overview of the associated "cybershrines," or online photos of material shrines, memorial webpages, and online condolence message boards and virtual candles. In addition to some background and tentative interpretation, I will conclude with suggestions for collection/documentation and suggestions for future research.

The following remarks are based on my personal experience as Principal Investigator of the Bonfire Memorabilia Collection Project at Texas A&M University, which I organized and directed following the collapse of the student bonfire in November, 1999, which killed twelve of our students. My subsequent research regarding spontaneous shrines at disaster sites has involved not only an extensive search of the pertinent scholarly and popular literature and media coverage of various shrines, but also personal visits to inspect the artifact collections and consult with persons responsible for the artifacts collected from the shrines for Princess Diana, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the shootings at Columbine High School. My impressions of the spontaneous shrines following the New York City/Washington terrorist attacks are based on media and internet coverage of them and information from CityLore, a folklore organization in New York City; I have not personally inspected any of these New York City shrines. I am currently on research leave from teaching at Texas A&M University in order to write a book-length study of the spontaneous shrine phenomenon.

Background

Modern people respond to the emotional aftermath of disaster and catastrophe in a variety of ways, ranging from wearing variously colored ribbons to candlelight vigils to group singing to the creation of spontaneous shrines at or near the site of the event. These spontaneous shrines are

among the deepest expressions of our shared humanity, combining ritual, pilgrimage, performance art, popular culture, and traditional material culture. The acres of flowers and other memorabilia in the streets of London after the death of Princess Diana, "The Fence" at Oklahoma City, the crosses silhouetted against the sky on the hill behind Columbine High School, as well as the memorabilia which have become part of our image of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

that spontaneous shrines are not only an appropriate, but an expected response to disaster. Roadside shrines and crosses which people erect to mark the sites of fatal car wrecks are spontaneous shrines on a smaller, more personal level. Common throughout the American southwest, where they are known as *descansos*, these roadside shrines now appear throughout the United States and are also common in various European countries, as well as in Australia. Ever-changing shrines have become a permanent feature of such celebrity burial sites as Elvis Presley's Graceland; the grave of Jim Morrison in Paris; and throughout Corpus Christi, Texas, the home of slain Tejano music star Selena. In the creation of these dynamic shrines, people are calling on the vast panoply of our cultural repertoire to create a tactile and visual expression of our connectedness to one another. The cybershines extend this cultural landscape into cyberspace and the emerging realm of virtual culture.

Shrines express

grips with events which numb our emotions and defy explanation. The shrines reduce the overwhelming enormity of the catastrophe to a more manageable human scale, thus helping to make the event more comprehensible, especially when the emotions evoked are new and raw. Placing a memento at a shrine gives people a sense of purpose, making them feel less helpless and powerless. For many people, placing a memento at a shrine is an act as sacred and comforting as lighting a candle at a church altar. The shrines are a metaphoric threshold which represents the end of numbness and the beginning of the ability to take action.

Given the vagaries of weather and the fragile nature of the paper and other organic components such as cut flowers, shrines are temporary. Spontaneous shrines lose their emotional impact and symbolic integrity when they become soggy, windblown, and tattered. Removal of the ephemeral shrines signals a return to secular status of the temporarily sacred landscape which was appropriated by the shrine. Weather permitting, spontaneous shrines generally stay in place throughout the liminal period between death and burial. Once the funerals begin, funeral services and gravesites replace the shrines as sites of pilgrimage to leave flowers and other mementos.

With each new catastrophe, idiosyncratic, variant shrines develop. In part due to media coverage, we have come to expect these shrines to follow in the wake of otherwise unbearable tragedies. In doing their job of reporting on and documenting tragedies and catastrophes, the media flood us with visual images, images which we demand so that we can see events for ourselves and try to begin to make our own sense of them. The shrines are understandably covered by the media, often as backdrops to T. V. voice-overs. Still photographs of shrines illustrate many feature stories in magazines and newspapers, in part because of the emotional impact of the photographs. The shrines have become such an integral part of the aftermath of the terrorist attacks that the cover of *The New Yorker* magazine (October 1, 2001) featured a drawing depicting a shrine to firefighters in the background as faceless pedestrians hurry by.

The shrines within sight of the Pentagon and at various sites in New York City--including the Armory, Union Square, Washington Square, Times Square, the Promenade along the Brooklyn waterfront and at firehouses and

churches throughout the city--as well as at embassies and other American facilities abroad--are a predictable response to the terrorist attacks. "Ground Zero" in New York City is too large and security is too tight there as well as at the Pentagon for the shrines to emerge in close proximity to the attack sites. The shrines following the terrorist attacks of September 11 they are located--are the most dramatic expression to date of this modern ritual of grief and grace.

Terminology, Typology and Iconography

The media often use the term "makeshift memorial" to refer to these shrines. I propose that "spontaneous shrines" is a more appropriate designation because:

1. the sites function as sites of ritual pilgrimage and are, therefore, sacred shrines rather than secular memorials. They emerge quickly, often within a few hours of the event. In contrast, memorials come later and express a quieter, more deliberate and usually official response. Memorials are often intended to be permanent and are aimed toward a future audience; spontaneous shrines are ephemeral and have an immediate audience. Memorials are much more passive; the spontaneous shrines are extraordinarily dynamic.
2. These sacred folk art assemblages are not "makeshift." As pure expressions of public sentiment, spontaneous shrines are unmediated folk art assemblages with no official guidelines or restrictions regarding where the shrines are placed or what they contain. At first glance, they may appear to be chaotic, but closer inspection reveals a coherent organizational principle in the arrangement of memorabilia which usually results in an aesthetically satisfying appearance.

The most common focus for the development of a spontaneous shrine is a prominent vertical surface, such as a fence or a wall, on which arrangements of memorabilia can be displayed. The horizontal surface supporting and adjacent to the wall or fence is also covered with memorabilia. The main pilgrimage and shrine site after the Oklahoma City bombing is now called "The Fence," and "The Wall" is the affectionate nickname for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The fences in London surrounding Kensington Palace and Buckingham Palace were the primary locations of shrines following the death of Princess Diana. The orange mesh security fence surrounding the site of the collapse of the Texas A&M University bonfire became the focus of the outpouring of memorabilia which followed that tragedy. As these shrines adjacent to and upon walls and fences grow, bouquets of cut flowers in cellophane wrappers flow like waves, breaking upon the vertical barrier. People place their floral and other offerings carefully to maintain this layered, wavy effect. Further demonstrating the deliberate--not makeshift--creation and development of spontaneous shrines is the complex repetition of images which function as mini-shrines within the larger assemblage.

The artifacts placed in spontaneous shrines are not random. My preliminary survey of various artifact assemblages revealed a consistent basic "vocabulary" which consists of flowers, votive candles, and a wide range of popular and material culture items appropriate to the event, including balloons, teddy bears and other stuffed animals, photographs, inscribed t-shirts, drawings, banners, posters, and other written expressions. Religious paraphernalia such as crosses, crucifixes, and angels are also frequently included. Many shrines contain books of condolence or blank sheets of plywood or posters for passers-by to write down their personal inscriptions. Signing formal books of condolence at St. James Palace and elsewhere in London and throughout the world became an integral feature of the

communal mourning behavior after the death of Princess Diana. The spiral notebooks and stapled sheets of paper which are the norm at most spontaneous shrines are much more informal.

Shrines usually develop as close to the site of the disaster as feasible. However, as exemplified by the shrines at the various American embassies throughout the world following the World Trade Center/Pentagon attacks, they are not restricted to proximity to the disaster site. After the first memorabilia is laid on the ground or attached to a wall or fence in the vicinity of the affected site or some other appropriate place, other items quickly follow in association. As more and more memorabilia accumulate, the site assumes a dual purpose: <

1. a place to leave a ritual offering, and
2. a pilgrimage site to come to and see what others have left.

Visitors to the sites are understandably quiet and subdued and are gentle with one another, often standing aside for someone to place an offering or making room for those who stop to pray and comforting those who weep.

Each shrine reflects the community most heavily and immediately affected by the event. Teddy bears and other stuffed animals were especially common and appropriate in the Oklahoma City shrine because so many children in the Murrah Building daycare center were killed or grievously injured. Stuffed animals also appeared at the shrines marking the site where Susan Smith drowned her two young sons in the fall of 1994 in South Carolina as well as at the home in Houston where Andrea Yates drowned her five children in the summer of 2001. Teddy bears and other stuffed animals also appeared throughout the various Princess Diana shrines, in part acknowledging her work on behalf of the world's children.

The shrines on the campus of Texas A&M University following the fatal collapse of the student bonfire in November, 1999, were filled with Aggie paraphernalia, ranging from caps and t-shirts in school colors to football ticket stubs and "grodes" (dirty clo thing which students wear while building the bonfire) and "pots" (hard hats the students wear while building the bonfire). A shrine developed on the sidewalk in front of the TriBecA apartment building of John F. Kennedy, Jr. and his wife, Carolyn Bessette, after they were killed in a plane crash in 1999. Photographs of Kennedy and his wife, and written messages were among the most common mementos placed in this shrine. The shrines in response to the terrorist attacks predictably are dominated by patriotic symbols, especially American flags, as well as votive candles, flowers, photographs, and written messages. Stuffed animals were not apparent in the early stages of most of the shrines following the terrorist attacks but began to appear later, perhaps as offerings left by children.

Perhaps the most dramatic shrine in the wake of the terrorist attacks is the wall of photographs of the missing at the Armory in New York City, which has received extensive media coverage. Judging from televised images and news commentaries and interviews, this display did not originate as a deliberate shrine but started instead as a desperate attempt by families and friends to do whatever they could to get information about their missing loved ones. As more and more photographs accumulated along the walls and other surfaces, the photographs became a pilgrimage site for those who wanted to see the spontaneous portrait gallery firsthand, maybe out of curiosity but perhaps more as a means of connecting somehow with those previously anonymous faces in this vast archive of grief. The enormity of our shared loss is manifested in the literally thousands of images of happy, beautiful, beloved people looking back at us from these candid snapshots and portraits, even as they are "once removed" for those of us who can see them only through the TV and newspaper or magazine pictures of the

pictures.

This unique shrine carries a myriad of complex messages. The photographs bring these "missing" people together randomly, much as they were together in life and ultimately at the moment of their deaths. As long as the pictures are on view, the people are not missing, they are not lost. They are there, on that wall, in that shrine, looking back at us. The New York City photographs echo a memorial display at the Oklahoma City National Museum. A separate room in the museum features portraits and possessions of the 168 people who died in the terrorist bombing. Here they are frozen in time, thus reminding us who they were before the bombing--reminding us that they were not lost completely in that terrible explosion. Their memory remains.

In the American Southwest, we have a saying for the meaning of the graffiti and mementos left throughout the centuries on cliff faces and other sites by travellers and explorers

City and Oklahoma City photograph galleries wordlessly express the same idiom.

Cybershrines

The internet provides a related venue for the creation of spontaneous shrines. *Cybershrines*, or webpages containing photographs of the material shrines, photo montages, and other associated images as well as websites for lighting virtual candles and virtual condolence books flooded the internet by the hundreds and perhaps thousands following the terrorist attacks. (See the upcoming article by Bruce Mason in this special issue of *NewFolk* for a more in-depth discussion of this phenomenon.) Cybershrines did not originate with the outpouring on the internet following the terrorist attacks. They were common following the death of Princess Diana and more recently followed in the wake of the death of NASCAR driver, Dale Earnhardt in February, 2001. Cybershrines were also a common response to the collapse of the Texas A&M University bonfire, the crash of the airplane carrying members of the Oklahoma State University basketball team, and the recent spate of American school shootings, as well as the assassination of Itzak Rabin in Jerusalem.

Collection/Documentation

Collecting the memorabilia from spontaneous shrines is a complicated, painstaking, and emotional process that necessarily entails wise local decisions regarding jurisdiction, conservation needs, and long-term agreements for storage as well as funding to support the endeavor. Methodologies of archiving, curation, and conservation of spontaneous shrines are complex and generally require professional input, especially the conservation of fragile items damaged by weather and exposure. At this time, there are only a few professionally managed collections of artifacts from spontaneous shrines. The Littleton Historical Museum of Littleton, Colorado, has the responsibility for a representative sample of artifacts from the Columbine High School shrines. The Oklahoma City National Memorial is the repository for the artifacts collected from The Fence that is part of the memorial there. The National Park Service daily collects the artifacts left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and archives them chronologically by type.

The Smithsonian Institution presented an exhibit of selected items from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial collection that was so popular it has become a permanent exhibit in the Museum of American History. The artifacts from the Texas A&M University bonfire were collected by adapting the methodology of salvage archaeology and are being processed by the Bonfire Memorabilia Collection Project, under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology

and the Center for Ecological Archaeology at Texas A&M University. CityLore, a folklore organization in New York City, is documenting the spontaneous shrines and other public expressions of grief following the attack on the World Trade Center and has placed photographs of some of the shrines on their website (<http://www.citylore.org>). Artifacts from various New York City shrines may be collected for use in future exhibits. One such exhibit is in the planning stages by CityLore.

Photography is the least complicated method of documenting spontaneous shrines. Thorough documentation of the shrines *in situ*, before they are dismantled, should consist of two types of photographs: documentary and illustration. Documentary photographs can record in a straightforward manner the exact location of various artifacts, their relative scale/size, and their relationships to one another. Illustrations capture more of the emotion and human suffering by including images of people visiting the shrines or contributing to them. Both types of photographs are essential for the thorough photo-documentation of shrines. Periodic or daily photographs of the same shrine site can also document the dynamic changes that the shrine undergoes as visitors add and sometimes re-arrange or take away artifacts. Periodic or serial photographs also can document the condition of the shrine due to weather, wind, or other destructive forces. Many of the artifacts left at shrines are so fragile that the only record of them is sometimes the photographs, because the actual artifacts (especially paper) are often destroyed by the weather.

Cybershrines and circulating e-mails are more difficult to document. Printing e-mails is one approach, but the sheer volume of messages usually makes such a collection unmanageable. Online archiving is a new approach, and therefore techniques and methodology are still evolving. At Texas A&M University, we established Project BEAM (Bonfire Electronic Archive of Memorabilia) in order to archive e-mails, cybershrines, and personal descriptions of artifacts. The website is currently accessible by password only; the address is: <http://bonfire.tamu.edu/beam/>. The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress is developing an online archive of the materials circulating online following the terrorist attacks; the addresses are: camm@loc.gov and www.webarchivist.org.

Suggestions for Further Research

Systematic research into the phenomenon of spontaneous shrines at disaster sites is the only way we will come to fully understand and appreciate this new grieving ritual. Among the kinds of research which have not thus far been undertaken are:

1. Mapping the geographic spread of shrines, noting the date and time of initial appearance whenever possible. For example, how quickly did shrines develop at various American embassies throughout the world? Do we know the locations of all the shrines following the New York City and Washington terrorist attacks, in these cities as well as elsewhere?
2. Documenting the growth of specific shrines over time through serial photography in order to more fully understand the aesthetic principles which govern their development. For example, we know from early photographs that the shrine in Oklahoma City began with either a single flower or palm fronds twined into the security fence. How do other shrines begin?
3. Maintaining inventories and/or representative collections of artifacts left at specific shrines.

4. Noting when and by whom various shrines are dismantled. Which communities choose to preserve selected artifacts? Where are they kept?
5. Determining if, other than the Vietnam Veterans Memorial display at the Smithsonian Institution, any other shrine artifacts have been put on subsequent display. If so, how much time must elapse before the emotional and spiritual power of these artifacts diminishes enough to treat them as objects in an artificial display?

Conclusion

While the phenomenon of spontaneous shrines has become a traditional expression of grief only within the past few decades, these shrines will no doubt continue to appear and become more complex in the years to come. Documenting these shrines through photographs, inventories of contents, and archiving of selected artifacts can help us to understand the full impact upon our culture of tragedies such as the terrorist bombings of September 11, 2001.

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Spontaneous Shrines: A Modern Response to Tragedy and Disaster

(Update 3/1/02)

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Since writing this article in October, 2001, I have learned that the term "spontaneous shrine" was coined by folklorist Jack Santino in 1992 in an article entitled, "'Not an Unimportant Failure': Rituals of Death and Politics in Northern Ireland," in Michael McCaughan, ed. *Displayed in Mortal Light* (Antrim: Antrim Arts Council, 1992). His most recent treatment of the spontaneous shrine phenomenon is in his new book, *Signs of War and Peace: Social Conflict and the Use of Public Symbols in Northern Ireland*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Santino also introduced the term "folk assemblage" in his article, "The Folk Assemblage of Autumn," in John Vlach and Simon Bronner, eds. *Folk Art and Art Worlds*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1986) and in a later article, "Yellow Ribbons and Seasonal Flags: The Folk Assemblage of War." *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 19-33.

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