

Virtual tombstones, tattoo tributes and mourning T-shirts are growing in popularity

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Blending cremated remains into tattoos, creating "virtual tombstones" online and displaying "Rest in Peace" car decals or T-shirts are unconventional ways people increasingly are using to honor the dead this century, a Baylor University researcher says.

"With 'do-it-yourself' memorials, people are creating their own ways of memorializing the dead, particularly in a more secularized society," said Candi Cann, Ph.D., an assistant professor of religion in Baylor's Honors College. "Some people are alienated from some common traditions such as a long funeral Mass. Cohesive rituals may not be part of their lives."

She made a presentation on "bodiless" memorials at the recent international conference, "Death, Dying and Disposal," of the Association for the Study of Death and Society.

In research based on interviews with the bereaved, Cann found that such memorials are "the opposite of what occurs in the religious realm with martyrs and saints and with relics," Cann said. "Martyrs and saints bring us closer to holiness and to God through their bodies and narratives of their suffering."

But modern-day bodiless memorials are increasingly "returning" the dead to us through visual or virtual "replacements" that are more personal than a memorial in a cemetery or in nature.

Wearing a tattoo as a tribute is not unlike customs of Victorian England

or the Civil War era, when people sometimes wore a lock of a loved one's hair or a photo in a brooch or watch chain, Cann said.

"People simply want to carry the dead with them," she said. "They see a tattoo as forever."

Generally, it's young people who get tattoos to express grief, Cann said. "Often, they choose one of their grandparents that died, because that's their first loss."

Some go so far as to blend cremated remains with tattoo pigment, although medical experts advise against the practice, and many tattoo artists refuse to do them to avoid legal complications.

These days, rather than black apparel traditionally worn at funerals, some people opt for a "mourning T-shirt" that may be the deceased person's favorite color. It may display dates of birth and death, an image, and an affectionate nickname and be worn long after a funeral.

"A T-shirt also is a way for people who aren't family or allowed time off from work to say, 'I am grieving,'" Cann said.

Car decals, as well as shoe polish or liquid chalk on vehicle windows, are being used to pay tribute to the dead.

While it has long been common to leave teddy bears or erect wooden crosses at the scene of a tragedy, people are becoming more imaginative and personal. Cann found a snow-white "ghost bike," festooned with a maroon Christmas garland and placed at the site of a bicycle accident.

But "the bike is a clean, pristine version - not the one that was mangled," Cann said.

Besides funeral home websites that allow "virtual visitors" to sign guest books, online mourning has evolved to include Facebook's "R.I.P." permanent memorials, as well virtual tombstones, which allow people to use their smartphones to scan headstone codes and launch websites with an interactive life story for those who visit the grave in person or online.

While spontaneous public memorials with flowers and teddy bears spring up after such tragedies as the Boston Marathon bombings, "those spaces are becoming smaller in geography and time," with people differing over how much is enough, Cann said.

But when such public memorials are removed, Cann said, they almost invariably return in "the virtual realm . . . The dead will return to haunt us if we do not acknowledge them."

Provided by Baylor University

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