What motivates the roadside shrines for young automobile accident victims?

Carol Tulpar

2005

Illumine: Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society

UVic Libraries ePublishing Services

Original citation:
Tulpar, C. (2005). What motivates the roadside shrines for young automobile accident victims? *Illumine, 4*(1), 18–25.
https://doi.org/10.18357/illumine4120051587

What Motivates the Roadside Shrines for Young Automobile Accident Victims?

Carol Tulpar, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

As recently as thirty years ago, impromptu roadside shrines of the type we see so commonly now were virtually non-existent in Canada and the U.S. Now nearly each time a road accident claims a young life, an ad hoc shrine springs up at the place where that life was lost. This paper explores, from various points of view, some of the possible motivations for these memorial shrines. In coming to terms with the changing zeitgeist, we may try to understand phenomena by viewing them through various lenses. Accordingly, in this essay, reference is made to material from ritual theory, morphic field theory, and post-modern thought.

This essay records a thought experiment about the impromptu roadside shrines that mark the scenes of violent and unexpected deaths, usually of young people. Over the past twenty or thirty years, these have increasingly become part of the Canadian landscape. They are seen in the U.S. and some other countries as well.

As we pass through life, society constantly changes around us. Old institutions wither away, and new practices come into being, sometimes gaining prominence in a relatively short time. Such is the case with the roadside shrines. What it is about our era that might have caused such a custom to take root? Seen repeatedly, yet only through the corners of our fast-moving eyes, these shrines exist mysteriously, as fleeting visions on the edge of our busy perambulations. Ironically, even passers-by wanting to take a closer look can scarcely do so. To stop beside the very busy roadways where the shrines are located is to risk the same fate as those who are memorialized there.

This paper does not discuss particular shrines in detail. Rather, it is the "invention" and the proliferation of this type of shrine that I seek to account for. By looking through various lenses of thought—historical, sociological, psychological and scientific—I put forward for consideration some possible explanations for these shrines, the recurring sight of which has become firmly established as part of our daily experience.

Of course there are certain common explanations given by the people who erect the shrines, the most obvious being to help bereaved families and friends come to terms with the shock of sudden death. In a letter to the *Edmonton Journal,* one young victim's mother explains that the visits and placing of memorabilia at the crash site by the friends of her son helped his family immensely, by showing them how his life, so precious to them, had also touched the lives of many others.[1]

Other reasons often given are to keep memory alive and to serve as a warning to others. Where a twenty-two year old Wisconsin mother was struck and killed by a car at a city intersection while strapping her baby into her vehicle, her family established a permanent shrine. Each week, they gather there and pray, hoping that the shrine will serve as a warning, and thus help them feel their loved one's death was not in vain.[2]

These shrines evoke strong emotion. Newspapers regularly report controversy around them. Marnie Ko describes the mixed reactions that followed when the City of Edmonton announced its intention to remove one of the larger shrines. While some agreed that "such public displays of grief are an eyesore and a potential hazard to motorists' concentration," others expressed anger at having this avenue for expressing their grief curtailed by bureaucracy. Ko reports that in the face of strong opposition, Edmonton softened its stance, allowing the memorials to stand for a certain period of time before they are removed.[3] In the same article, Ko quotes Gary Laderman, an associate professor of religion at Emory University in Atlanta, who considers them "*essential*" (italics mine) to grieving families, saying that they "repair a hole in the social fabric."[4] If this is so, how and when have they become so necessary?

In the United States, a Massachusetts newspaper article published in 1999 describes another controversy arising out of attempts at regulating the shrines following the huge proliferation of memorials on a particular section of road already considered dangerous. When the article was published, relatives of accident victims who died on Route 88 in Westport alone had "posted more than twenty

[1] Marnie Ko, "*Human Touch or Roadside Clutter?*" *Report Newsmagazine*, February 18, 2002. http://www.marnieko.com/shrines.htm.

[2] Rick Barrett, "Roadside Memorials Bring Both Comfort and Concern," *Journal Sentinel,* May 21, 2001, via http://www.jsonline.com/news/state/may01/shrine22052101a.asp, 2.

[3] Ko, 2-3.

[4] Ibid., 2-3.

crosses, and a Star of David."[5] One mother whose late son's memorial had been taken down because of road work, angry that this public "warning" might turn out to be illegal, insisted that she would restore it.[6]

Survivor's guilt must also be particularly strong when the young die with unexpected suddenness. The living naturally question whether they could have done something to prevent the tragedy. Parents may berate themselves for decisions made, such as lending the car that night, or failing to control well-known risks such as drinking or drugs, or too many teens in cars. When accidents take only some lives, survivors wonder "Why not me?" Where drinking or other risky behaviours are factors, the shrines must create an eerie reminder of guilt and shame, perhaps at the same time providing some avenues of assuaging such feelings through ritual atonement. Certainly, friends return to the scene, often repeatedly.

The rationales given by family members for erecting them, and the controversies, too, are instructive in understanding the recent proliferation of roadside shrines. Yet I believe there are other, more complex factors at play that might account for these new practices. The latter part of the twentieth century brought about a huge wave of social and cultural change, including a huge increase in both urbanization and cultural diversity. Today's towns and cities are the homes of many overlapping cultural and faith communities, making it virtually impossible to carry on traditional ways that seemed merely "normal" fifty, or even thirty years ago.

Interestingly, the shrines exhibit marked commonalities that reveal their roots in traditional Christian burial customs. Crosses, flowers, and epitaphs are almost universal features, with personal memorabilia usually displayed as well. Although our communities are now very diverse in terms of religious backgrounds, for the most part, the shrines at first glance do not appear to reflect this diversity.

The Surrey Leader recently published on its front page a photo of an impromptu shrine that was placed at the death site of a young man named Gurjinder Singh Sidhu, who was, according to the newspaper, gunned down as a result of "Indo-Canadian" gang violence. Although he was rooted in the Sikh tradition, his memorial shrine follows the common form. Along with a bouquet of white roses, chrysanthemums and ferns, and a white teddy bear, a simple home-made cross of unpainted lumber had been driven into the grass, with a smaller white cross propped against the foot of the larger one.[7] What are we to make of this? The cross is an ancient symbol, and as used in the roadside shrines may not convey only the usual Christian allusion. Tom Harpur reveals in a recent book that the cross was "by far the most universal of all religious icons…[and had] a range of wholly different meanings for untold millennia" before Christianity came into being, symbolizing "spirit plunged into matter," the intersection between earthly and spiritual life.[8]

Seen through intuitive eyes, rather than the lenses of logic, the shrines may convey subtler meanings. At the gate of the shopping mall, the veritable church of secular consumerism, the shrines remind us of the ultimate mysteries of life and death. Perhaps our soulful yearnings, so neglected by modernity, are re-asserting themselves through such spontaneous expressions of unconscious wisdom.

A salient feature of the roadside shrines is their existence in a border zone, in several senses. Physically, they exist on the ambiguous border between the public road and either the adjacent private land, or the wild land that borders the highways between towns. Temporally, they also occupy a transitional era; modernity is almost exhausted; a new *zeitgeist* is coming into being. Yet our vision of what form this may take is limited precisely because we are living within this liminal time when old assumptions and habits of thought are dying away but new ones have yet to be firmly established. Indeed, as well as occupying liminal zones in terms of time and space, metaphysically also, these shrines occupy a border between thought eras. In our time, the extremes of secular scientism that for too long made our long-suffering planet seem a mere thing to be exploited are now giving way to movements toward re-sacralizing the earth.

In the same way that secular scientism roughly exploited the desacralized earth, secular humanism virtually defined the human soul out of existence. Now contemporary writers in a wide variety of fields are focusing on the need to alter the flawed attitudes bequeathed to us by modernity, as we finally begin to understand their tragic limitations and take action to protect our planet from the depredations that have resulted from these attitudes. Looking back into

[5] "Law would limit roadside memorials," *South Coast Today*, December 6, 2002, via http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/02-99/01-16-99/a01sr007.htm.

[6] "Law would limit roadside memorials."

[7] Dan Ferguson, "What is taking place almost defies logic: Forum examines increasing violence among young Indo-Canadian men," *The Surrey Leader,* June 19, 2002.

[8] Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004), 43-44.

history, we see that the distorting lens of modernity has not always been worn, and in our time, we are obliged to change lenses once again. As Dudley Young reminds us, "The evidence is increasingly accumulating to suggest that the occidental experiment in secular scientism over the past four centuries has suppressed certain vital processes of a more or less religious nature, and this is becoming intolerable."[9]

Young is only one of many writers on the cusp between eras. What was so clearly "known" during modernity is steadily being eroded, made irrelevant. Perhaps creating shrines for the young who die suddenly and unexpectedly is a spontaneous response to the changing ritual needs of the occupants of this border zone between eras.

To explain what I mean by the end of modernity, let me turn to the writing of Peyman Vahabzadeh. Writing from a sociological-anthropological standpoint, he vividly explains how many of the assumptions that we have lived with are losing their long unquestioned validity. Vahabzadeh says that society is "withering…as a unified totality" and thus we witness how "the dominant norms of progress, the cultural orientations of the programmed society become not only increasingly pluralistic but in most cases also divergent or even irreconcilable."[10] Indeed, we witness the pluralism, the divergence, the tendency towards irreconcilability of views, all around us. Vahabzadeh speaks of "the shift to a post-modern era, which passes through a moment of exhaustion of universal norms."[11]

Without a unified, normative society around us to define our ritual customs, ritualizing thus happens on an *ad hoc* basis, as we move through the transitional era. The individual "actors" posited by Vahabzadeh, as they articulate their own experience without reference to unitary principles, are becoming ever less inclined to permit overarching controls over their lives. Logically, this would include refusing to be told what forms and places of ritual are permissible or socially acceptable.

From a socio-political perspective, Vahabzadeh also speaks of the "eroding distinction between public and private spheres" within the modern liberal democracies. [12] It strikes me that these shrines provide an excellent illustration of the blurring between public and private, a distinction which Vahabzadeh rightly argues has been central to liberal democratic ideas. In an age when cultural diversity is as much a norm as the vast net of instant communications systems, we can no longer escape from the awareness of how knowledge itself is affected by our post-modern conditions. In spite of what Vahabzadeh calls the "passionate craving" we have inherited from the Enlightenment thinkers to do so, it becomes increasingly impossible to apply one universal standard of truth to all. [13]

Writers who attempt to define the early post-modern era agree that it is vastly different from the world that those of us in middle age so clearly remember. The absence of overarching truths is a hallmark of the new era. Post-modernism has meant moving away from universalist principles that have long been dominant. As cracks open in our habitual ways of thinking, we cannot fail to see the tragic limitations of secular scientism; it is increasingly clear that our earth can no longer sustain the treatment that has been meted out under its mesmerizing sway. Happily, the emerging era is not nihilistic. Indeed its coming into being is at least in part a positive response to the negative results of the destructive path that humanity followed in accepting the logic of the modern age. Post-modernity, says Vahabzadeh, is not one but many new movements.[14] Thus the creation of the shrines may be viewed as a new social movement, a project carried out by actors who refuse to be governed by hegemonic definitions of how things are supposed to be done.

The notion of a need to revive the soul and re-sacralize the earth has been voiced with increasing frequency and urgency in recent years, by scientists as well as humanists. By comparing us to "primitives" of the past, Dudley Young accentuates the serious blind spot in the thought of our era, a flaw which once seen, necessitates that we give up our exhausted and exhausting ways and be willing to initiate new ways of living. "Unlike us," he says, "primitive man was not disposed to separate his own soul from the world soul. Soul is soul, invisible power that moves in the wind," which cannot "be chopped up and compartmentalized." Young thinks "there is much to be said for such primitive stupidity."[15]

---

[9] Dudley Young, *The Origins of the Sacred: The Ecstasies of Love and War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), xvi-xvii.

[10] Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences: Toward a Radical Phenomenology of Contemporary Social Movements* (Burnaby, B.C.: Simon Fraser University, 2000), 38.

[11] Vahabzadeh, 24.

[12] Ibid., 38.

[13] Ibid., 38.

[14] Vahabzadeh, 311.

[15] Dudley Young, *The Origins of the Sacred*, xxi.

Young is by no means the only writer to discuss the urgent need to take action to counter some of the excesses and imbalances of modernity. Undeniably, the twentieth century, in spite of its brilliant contributions to civilization, was also a time of unprecedented violence. Is it any wonder, when the overarching "truths" of modernity permitted such horrors, that people would lose trust in and rebel against the institutions that controlled them? Perhaps the shrines signal that individuals are choosing now to listen to their own soul movements, as they take back some control of the ritualization of grief from the hands of the long-powerful institution of the church. And perhaps, rebelling against the consumer creed of our times, people are creating the *ad hoc* shrines to express themselves individually, soulfully, even artistically, refusing the standardized "tasteful" consumption advocated as *de rigueur* by the funeral home.

Books on caring for the soul have been proliferating in recent years. Among the different writers on this subject, there is a common message: we have been neglecting our souls and must now devote conscious effort to cultivate them. Thomas Moore has entitled one of his books precisely, *Care of the Soul*; James Hillman uses the ancient term "daimon" to describe the individual soul that accompanies us from birth. The character you are born with, he says, "is given, a gift, as the old stories say, from the guardians upon your birth."[16] David Whyte expresses a similar idea, saying: "The soul of a person lies outside of time and belongs to the unknown, it is the sacred otherness of existence…the soul is owned by no one, not even by the personality formed around it."[17]

Throughout human history, living and dead have been recognized as souls. There have always been rituals for the souls of the dead. The twentieth century also had these rituals, and so will such rituals undoubtedly continue in new forms, as a new *zeitgeist* establishes itself and becomes visible. The shrines may well reflect the human need and desire to dig deeper into soul stuff, as well as to participate consciously and believingly in the re-sacralizing of our home planet.

Meanwhile, as pilgrims in a threshold era, seeing the future of our civilization only dimly, we mark the passing of our dead beside the road, revealing ourselves as wayfarers who wish to leave our mark. I suggest that the *ad hoc* shrines give public and visible expression to human feelings about the nature of the world, and our place in it. As we leave behind the known country of the twentieth century and travel the mysterious road between two eras, we ritually mark the roadside, commemorating those who have briefly inhabited this liminal era, between modernity, and…what, exactly? The new era cannot yet be quite seen.

It seems likely that the non-rational, insight-providing part of the psyche is a powerful motivator in the creation of the shrines. Although reason dictates that the dead cannot literally remain among us, we still attempt to preserve them effectively in memory. We are loath to let go our dead, especially those who die young, unexpectedly, when they "haven't yet lived," or left any descendents. It is much harder to accept such a death than it is to come to terms with the death of someone who "has had a good life," is old, or has for long been ill or suffering.

In the past, Canadian society provided a unitary and standard outlet for the very human need people have to remember and honour their dead. Until World War II and beyond, people tended to remain in a single community for life. As recently as about half a century ago, it was the norm for Canadians to die at home and be buried in the grounds of the churches they belonged to. Only during late modernity, as secular professionals replaced religious leaders in so many ritual roles, did deaths begin routinely to take place in hospitals. When people died at home, their souls were cared for by their churches, mainly various Christian denominations. Church funerals carried out the death rites, and the bereaved were supported by a faith community of people well-known to them. Parishioners were buried beside their churches, providing a locus for the souls of the dead. Even people who were not regular church attendants retained some loose affiliation with a church; thus their dead would be buried by "their" church. Close to home, these graves remained accessible to the bereaved through the changing seasons of mourning: for visiting, for tending, and as an abiding presence. When one went to church, the souls of the ancestors were there too.

Now many of these funerary rituals appear to have been transposed to the roadside shrines. Yet, writing in *The Vancouver Sun*, Shelly Fralic reports that the people she interviewed said their loved ones had *also* had traditional funerals and cemetery burials. Meanwhile, the ad hoc shrines are often

[16] James Hillman, *The Soul's Code, in Search of Character and Calling* (New York: Warner Books, 1996), 7.

[17] David Whyte, *The Heart Aroused* (New York: Anchor Doubleday), 22.

visited on the anniversaries of the deaths they commemorate.[18]

Why the "duplication" of similar rituals? And why the attenuation or displacement of traditional burial rituals and the proliferation of the roadside shrines? It is likely that on the one hand, many people feel less closely tied to a nearby community church than they did in the past, and on the other hand, individuals want a freer hand than the church provides to articulate their unique experiences of grieving in their own way, at the site "where he drew his last breath." Importance has been given to graves from time immemorial, and marking the place of death is also an ancient practice. In like fashion, Fralic reports, the shrine builders show a marked tendency to sacralize the site of the death, as the title of her article suggests.[19] Evidently, marking the place where the spirit has left the body has gained in prominence at the same time that churchyard visits and grave tending have become less the norm than in earlier times.

Perhaps the shrines also permit mourners to participate in an eternal time that folds back on itself, in a way that can be experienced neither through standardized rituals nor in rational-linear time. This may be particularly true when the bereaved lack a strong emotional tie to the church that buries the loved one. Psychologists know that it is possible through non-rational thought processes to re-participate in experiences that are already "over and done with" in a rational sense.[20] From a psychological perspective, as well as from a ritual studies one, through the shrines apparently it is possible to re-establish or maintain a strong sense of the connection with the dead.

During secular modernity, and even now as we struggle blindly on the cusp of post-modernity, we have to a large degree lost touch with what has been called "timeless time." In the simple act of attending a church where family ancestors were buried, and participating once a week in church rituals and services, people had a regular outlet in their lives for participating in the part of life that is outside of the arrow of time. In sacred time, the dead were present again, and God could be felt. Before the middle of the twentieth century, church rituals assuaged a human need that soulless secular modernity unconsciously squelched in the years that followed. When the dead were associated with a specific place in the earth, they could be evoked and remembered there, whenever their loved ones felt the need. The practice of cremation, which has become common relatively recently in Canada, also means there is no particular place to associate with the dead.

From a psychological perspective, the shrines also appear to have a darker side. Though they clearly provide comfort and closure for the people who erect them, they are often an emotionally jarring presence for passers-by. We are a culture that pursues materialism, and avoids thinking about death. Yet right at the very gates of the shopping malls, the veritable churches of consumerism, these shrines remind us of what has been repressed, providing a strong counterpoint to the carefully engineered illusions created by marketers. Ironically, this is a gift, a salutary reminder of the undone psychic work of our spiritually blind and death-denying culture.

Ronald Grimes says it is critical in our time to re-establish powerful, convincing rituals that penetrate "deeply into the bone." Grimes suggests that Mexican culture has a healthier attitude toward death, and more effective death rites. Mexicans, he says, greet death, "belieffully" and playfully as well as ironically, and suggests that we might well do the same. He advocates turning death rites into celebrations which provide conditions for dwelling and communicating with the dead, "*as if* they had presence and counsel to offer."[21] Gina Hyams agrees, saying Mexicans "not only accept the inevitability of death, they embrace its power as being essential to the fabric of life."[22] She recommends that we consciously adopt the Mexican custom of devoting a day to celebrating the dead. She describes how to construct and use the altar, as well as the benefits: "Day of the Dead altars give tangible form to our feelings of loyalty, affection and longing for those who have passed away."[23] I would suggest that the roadside shrines may be a movement in the direction of such participatory celebrations with the dead.

Grimes also reminds us that people who do not ritually mark their important life passages often regret their failure to do so. It is important that we

[18] Shelly Fralic, "Where he took his last breath, the modern-day phenomenon of the roadside memorial," *The Vancouver Sun,* February 4, 2002, A9.
[19] Ibid., 9.
[20] The notion that time as experienced by people is not the same as rational calendar time is discussed at length by R.D. Laing in *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967). Ronald Grimes also mentions this in his book *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-inventing rites of passage* (Berekeley: University of California Press, 2000).
[21] Grimes, 281.
[22] Gina Hyams, *Day of the Dead* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 7.
[23] Hyams, 86.

fully attend to such events, spiritually, as well as in the psychological and social realms, he warns, since "unattended, a major life passage can become a yawning abyss, draining off psychic energy, engendering social confusion, and twisting the course of the life that follows it," and becoming a spiritual sinkhole "around which hungry ghosts, those greedy personifications of unfinished business, hover."[24]

Provocatively, Grimes asks "What does it mean to say a funeral 'works'? What are funerals supposed to do?" His answer is that they "liberate us to the gift of tears…help us find our grief, even if that grief is left over from some other death and our mourning for someone other than the deceased."[25] He cites Princess Diana's funeral as an example, saying it was "good to grieve with the world" and that her funeral actually conjured pain.[26]

If this is so, perhaps this kind of public outpouring helps individuals to break the cycle of alienation from certain aspects of their own experiences that are culturally unsanctioned. It may be that the roadside shrines, by interrupting people in the midst of life, conjure up the kind of grief that Grimes refers to. This notion also provides insight into what leads strangers who pass the shrines to write to the bereaved families, to pray for them, to leave flowers or stuffed animals for the victims, as they frequently do.

Grimes offers this novel idea: "For ritual purposes it is enough that the dead persist in memory, imagination, or in the form of visual icons and that we approach them with empathy or respect. *Belief, it seems, is not an absolute requirement* [italics mine]."[27] He does not tell us, however, on what ritual efficacy depends, except that by our participation, the ritual must carry us through necessary transformation, taking up residence in our very marrow. "Ceremonial effectiveness is not undermined by sustained critique," he adds, emphasizing that "People may participate in death rites not only feeling grief or expressing belief but also critically, ironically, playfully, imaginatively, pragmatically, or in a state of suspended disbelief."[28] Society, he suggests, must consciously work to reinvent death rites, using experimental approaches and wrestling control from the institutions that have reduced their effectiveness. Churches and death professionals have monopolized death rituals, curtailing the freedom to experiment and make death rites more meaningful, inspiring and effective. In order to renew our myths and images and support communing with the dead, he advocates interacting directly with the dead as if they were alive. Interestingly, this is done at the shrines, where people leave notes to the dead *as if they were alive*.

Hyams suggests that a *rapprochement* with death might be a way of satisfying another important function of ritual, namely, alleviating our alienation from each other. Through ritual, we can renew our human ties, and by extension, our ties to our planet. Perhaps the roadside shrines, with their ragtag collections of memorabilia, attempt to do just that. As people are freed from the constraints of universal norms, they open themselves more to the mysteries of life and death. Once a year, as Mexicans eat, talk, write letters to and dance with the dead, they participate in time that has already passed. Do our roadside shrines provide a similar opportunity, a similar consolation?

Biologist Rupert Sheldrake is another writer who has written extensively about the need to resacralize our world, explaining his fascinating concept of morphic resonance, which provides a possible physical and scientific explanation of why certain places on the earth have long been and continue to be considered sacred, and how this sacralization occurs. Pointing out that the word "field" has long been used to describe regions of influence, Sheldrake states that his morphic field theory arises out of longstanding scientific concepts. The idea of the spirits of places as morphic fields implies that particular places "have a kind of collective character and memory" including that caused "by self-resonance with their own past."[29]

Morphic resonance takes place, explains Sheldrake, on the basis of similarity, and hence the patterns of resonance are also specific to each season of the year.[30] This might explain why people often revisit the shrines on anniversaries of the death. Common experience tells us that seasonal conditions help to evoke past times. As Sheldrake says, memory plays a part in how people respond to particular places. He adds that "through morphic resonance there will also be a component of collective memory, through which a person can tune in to the past experiences of other people in the same place."[31] The quality of a place depends on what has happened there, as well as how these events have been

[24] Grimes, 281.
[25] Ibid., 281.
[26] Ibid., 281.
[27] Ibid., 280.
[28] Grimes, 281.
[29] Sheldrake, 146.
[30] Ibid., 147.
[31] Ibid., 147.

experienced by the participants. In sacred places "the past can in some sense become present", and thus these sacred sites "become doorways to realms of experience which transcend the ordinary limitations of space and time."[32] Significantly, Sheldrake reminds us that "the processes by which particular places become holy are still going on."[33]

Journalist Shelly Fralic describes one mother's experience when she goes to her son's roadside memorial. The mother says "an odd comfort" settles over her, despite the harsh memories it holds.[34] She returns to the place "because that's where it (Chris's life) stopped."[35] For her, the shrine is a place of pilgrimage, a relatively common experience among those who visit the roadside shrines. The mother of fifteen-year-old Jared Dion still frequents his memorial shrine beside the road. This shrine began several months after his death, when his mother asked to be taken to the place where her youngest son had died. Not only the family, but "strangers were drawn" to the roadside shrine, just a little garden until one day when she found that someone had added a cross.[36] Today, more than five years later, it is a neatly kept tiny garden, surrounding a wooden cross with Jared's name and dates. At the family's insistence, it was left intact in the boulevard when the road was widened.

According to Sheldrake's definition of morphic resonance, meaning should be added with each visit of the relatives and friends, as they participate in the suspension of the ordinary arrow of time. This appears to be a conscious use of sacred doorways to transcend ordinary space-time limitations. While our culture worships reason, fact, and science, explaining away our more mystical experiences, still, consciously or unconsciously, the members of such a culture find ways of meeting their soulful needs. Indeed, these mourners may be seen as assisting in the vital process of re-sacralizing the earth. Escaping the hegemony of overarching twentieth-century myths, people on the cusp of the new era are creatively reworking ancient strategies, (for roadside shrines go back centuries…), following their soul promptings.

In discussing the history of ritual studies, Catherine Bell credits Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950) and Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883-1959) with identifying the phenomenological dimension of religion, including the common elements that underlie all religious experience, and, along with others, postulating the notion of the human being as *homo religious,* acknowledging the sacred as an inborn element of human consciousness.[37] Although *Homo religiosus*, like Adam Smith's *homo economicus,* is a cartoon character, the use of such metaphors sheds some light on our experience. "Much of the study of ritual," says Bell, "was caught up in the quest to find both the historical origins and the ahistorical or eternal essence of religion," but "the study of ritual also…helped construct a portrait of the so-called primitive psyche in terms of how it differed from modern ways of thinking and still survived in the very depths of modern consciousness."[38] Although "ritual is…itself a construction," with "many untested assumptions" it has successfully "been pressed into service to explain the roots of religion in human behaviour in ways that are meaningful to Europeans and Americans of this century."[39] Ritual theorists, says Bell, "attempt to delineate the broad outlines of what is meaningful human experience in general."[40] Though in modern life, we may be estranged from ancient "patterns and rhythms," this very fact implies "the power of a potential return to meaning." It is this idea that "is the heart of the perennial philosophy of universal myth and ritual patterns that continues to speak to new generations."[41]

How might the roadside shrines represent such a return to meaning? Certainly, passing strangers, along with the bereaved, find meaning there. The leaving of offerings on the shrines by strangers suggests a kind of pilgrimage, itself a process of sacralization. According to Sheldrake, pilgrims "participate in the sacred qualities of the place and in the religious observances practiced there."[42] People pray and contemplate at the shrines, lighting candles or incense and leaving offerings there as well. As Grimes suggests, traditional ritual forms have not been meeting current needs and the shrines may well be a response to that. Sheldrake theorizes about why, for spiritual guidance, people in the West have often looked to other traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, and various kinds of shamanism, as well as attempting to revive paganism and goddess worship, and theorizes that this springs from "a sense that Christianity and Judaism have lost contact with

[32] Ibid.,147-8.
[33] Ibid., 148.
[34] Fralic, A8.
[35] Ibid., A8.
[36] Ibid., A8.
[37] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9.
[38] Ibid., 20.
[39] Bell, 21.
[40] Ibid., 23.
[41] Ibid.,23.
[42] Sheldrake, 151.

mystical insight, with visionary experience, with a sense of the life of nature, and with the power of ritual."[43]

Rupert Sheldrake's morphic field theory applies, he explains, from the level of the cosmos down to the everyday. The visitations to roadside shrines, the prayers that are offered there, and the simple rituals that are carried out there thus become activities that affect the universe itself. This idea echoes common expressions that people have long used to express religious experience: being part of something greater than themselves, participating in a cosmic process, with the aim of feeling an overwhelming sense of peace and belonging. [44]

This is a hopeful idea: if the universe is endlessly creative, endlessly evolving new forms of organization, then over time, our limited views naturally give way to increasing understanding. Thus, the small acts of resacralization that are going on at the roadside shrines may represent a valuable contribution to our evolution, our collective future.

It seems that the roadside shrines, created and sustained out of an impulse to expand consciousness, show an opening to mystery that is becoming a hallmark of the coming *zeitgeist,* as we finally turn our backs on the twentieth century and look forward with a resolute willingness to change. Sheldrake says that "According to the hypothesis of formative causation, the conscious and unconscious memory of places and times is strongly influenced by morphic resonance."[45] This idea is easy to accept, because it is possible to sense the sacred in certain places. Here is a scientific theory that is consistent with the experiences people have at the roadside shrines.

Discussing the connection between rituals and morphic resonance, Sheldrake raises a provocative question: "Why do people all over the world believe that through ritual activities they are participating in a process that takes them out of ordinary secular time, and somehow brings the past into the present?" He proposes that morphic resonance "really can bring the past into the present," noting that ritual performers do connect with those in the past, and that, "The greater the similarity between the way the ritual is performed now and the way it was performed before, the stronger resonant connection between the past and present participants."[46]

Writing about the purposes of ritual in his book *Deeply into the Bone,* Ronald Grimes describes the general goal of rituals for the dead as transforming them into ancestors. But clearly, those who die very young, without having children of their own, cannot be re-formulated into ancestors in a literal sense. These are the ones who receive the tribute of wayside shrines. Perhaps we keep them with us by constructing their memorials in places where we cannot fail to remember their transitory lives, acknowledge their brief earthly time and dearth of descendents.

We are haunted by the past in many ways. Metaphorically, at least, the ghosts of the departed may still be stuck at the shrines, because they have not yet been processed into ancestors through the use of socially accepted rituals that carry "deeply into the bone." If that is so, no wonder the shrines send a chill down our spines as we drive by**.** [47]

To the degree that the social constructionists are right in claiming that the societies we live in create us, then the individuals created by diverse, secular, alienated non-unitary societies are themselves alienated, denied access to the now exhausted unitary "meta-narratives" posited (and mostly vilified) by post-modern theorists. We are still in the cusp of this change, and thus, darkly pessimistic post-modern theories notwithstanding, we may still hope for a new era when people will once more find unifying principles and purposes that can transcend personal and cultural differences, allowing us to participate peacefully in re-sacralizing the planet that nurtures us all.

The evidence of the shrines may be taken as a signpost pointing the way beyond our narrow, desacralized and pessimistic era, as they defy old custom to reveal realities that have been kept hidden. The creation of the shrines breaks our taboo about death, providing a salutary reminder of the perennial fact of death in the midst of life, a commonplace in the old "primitive" cultures.

Secular individualism, so reified in the culture of the West, does not represent the whole human. In the new era, if our planet is to survive with us as a species living with and on it, we must find what David Whyte calls "a vision of life that helps us remember we are human souls, living at the center of a troubled and ultimately unfathomable world."[48] The shrines may be a salutary signal that we have already begun to do just that.

[43] Ibid., 152.
[44] Sheldrake, 162.
[45] Grimes, 137.
[46] Ibid., 142.
[47] Grimes, title phrase.
[48] Whyte, 261.