

**Personal Death and Public Grief:
Reflectionson Trauma, Consolation,
and Communal Commemoration in America**

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< Abstract >

Public commemoration of unexpected death in America, while often focused on charismatic celebrities in the short term, typically finds permanent form only in the remembrance of the sudden mass deaths of average citizens. This paper examines the dynamics of public memorializing of large-scale death from its origins during the US Civil War to the present. The crucial turning point in public commemoration is located in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM), which touched off a “memorial mania” across the United States. The key innovations of the VVM were its origins within a specific group asserting its identity, and its implied emphasis on victimization through trauma, which made the Wall in Washington, DC America’s first true therapeutic memorial. The paper concludes with lessons from the American experience for other nations enduring similar traumas by examining the sources of modern memorializing – a contemplative attitude towards death rooted in the Romantic sensibility, victimization, and democratization. Together they can, if thoughtfully applied in the creation of commemorative memorials, foster individual and even national catharsis when people are confronted with a major tragedy.

[**Keywords**] memorials, attitudes toward death, democratization, victimization, mass trauma, catharsis

I

“Every Man Dies Alone,” as the English-language title of Hans Fallada’s

1947 novel bluntly reminds us (Fallada 2009). The sentiment is echoed in the 2001 US cult film *Donnie Darko*, in which another character teaches Donnie that “every living creature on this earth dies alone” (Kelly 2003, 20, 49). We grieve alone after a death as well, although usually we can share the burden within a small network of family, friends, and colleagues. But at times the grief spreads until it becomes a public phenomenon, occasionally almost universal. The phenomenon is often at its most acute with the unexpected death of a celebrity who had assumed a significant place in our sense of self. Older Americans first saw the phenomenon with the abrupt deaths of Marilyn Monroe and John F. Kennedy, then with the similarly unexpected demises of Princess Di and a number of figures in popular music, notably Elvis Presley, John Lennon, and Kurt Cobain. The sharp communal reactions to their passing reflected the importance of shared cultural publics in an increasingly global consumer society. For the most part, however, the impact faded in a matter of weeks, and except for a rare figure like Kennedy, whose “eternal flame” at his graveside beside the Arlington National Cemetery still attracts visitors, or Presley, whose Graceland mansion has become a site for memorial pilgrimages, their deaths are seldom recalled in permanent structures that intentionally focus on and inevitably recall the emotions unleashed by their sudden losses.

In the United States, most permanent memorials commemorating sudden death deal not with individual celebrities but rather with multiple or mass deaths of individuals who were usually unremarkable except in the manner of their passing. Here the situation with celebrity deaths is reversed; it is precisely the obscurity of the dead that helps explain the trauma of members of the larger public who not only had had no emotional investment in their existence prior to their deaths, but who usually had never heard of them. Because what causes us to mourn these multiple sudden deaths is not their personal uniqueness but what they have in common with one another and with us, over the past century and a half their deaths have often received permanent commemoration that is as much about the living audiences as the suddenly dead, as part of a common democratic community. In the words of U.S. Army Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs, who had been instrumental in creating Arlington National Cemetery

during the Civil War, “All care for the dead is for the sake of the living” (Neff 2005, 1, 192-193).

II

The Civil War had been the most traumatic event in US history for the families affected. In confronting its toll on the American people on both sides of the conflict, “the United States,” as Drew Gilpin Faust has explained, “embarked on a new relationship with death” (Faust 2008, xi). The most recent estimate has raised the number of military deaths to 750,000 (Gugliotta 2012). This would represent more fatalities than in the combination of all other wars fought by US forces from the American Revolution through Iraq and Afghanistan; the death toll would have been 85% larger than for World War II, out of a national population a quarter the size of the United States in 1940 (Wikipedia 2014). Not coincidentally, the Civil War inaugurated the modern American commemoration of the dead, with the quick purchase in 1863 of much of the battlefield in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania as a permanent burial ground and memorial to the men who died in the war’s bloodiest single battle in early July; it was at the memorial park’s dedication ceremony only four and a half months after the carnage that Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address. The war would soon become the most memorialized event in US history, with a network of national cemeteries, including the privately developed burial grounds for the Confederate dead that were eventually taken over by the US government; sculptures such as the Robert Gould Shaw memorial across from the Massachusetts State House in Boston; and the ubiquitous statues of Confederate soldiers in courthouse squares throughout the American South (Wills 1992; Savage 1994; Levinson 1998, 38-74; Brundage 2000; Blight 2001; Blair 2004; Neff 2005; Faust 2008, 61-170; Janney 2013). In Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886), even Basil Ransom, a former Confederate soldier, lingers while visiting Harvard’s Memorial Hall in front of the stone tablets bearing the names and class year of Harvard’s fallen “student-soldiers” of the Union Army, for “Most

of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place – names often without other history, and forgotten Southern battles. For Ransom these things were not a challenge nor a taunt; they touched him with respect, with the sentiment of beauty” (James 1985, 1024).

Nevertheless, the memorializing of the war dead represented more than simply a reaction to national trauma, and one sign of the wider significance can be found in the stone tablets that so moved a former foe in James’s novel. The Civil War was the first major conflict in which the dead were not left in anonymous mass graves, in which efforts were made to name and separately inter each individual casualty. Lincoln would describe an America “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”; the cemetery that he was helping inaugurate was dedicated to the proposition that they should die equal as well (Wills 1992, 263). Although Lincoln grounded his text in the ideals of 1776, the attitudes and actions of the founding generation had not in reality been as democratic as he suggested. Even during the direst moment of the American Revolution, the harsh winter of 1777-78 when over 3,000 troops died from illness and exposure at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, only one of the dead was interred in a marked grave – significantly, an officer who wanted to be buried beside his unnamed men (Laqueur 1994, 158; Hass 1998, 43-63). The Civil War, and above all the policies implemented at Gettysburg, democratized death in an equality of soldiers across ranks, all worthy of equivalent respect.

Similarly, most memorial statuary had previously honored individual warriors, usually generals. The process of democratization in the nineteenth century meant, alongside or in place of memorials to past leaders, the addition of statues of symbolic nameless fighters such as the Confederate foot soldiers memorialized in the South or the Minuteman statue at Concord Bridge, which although recalling the colonists who fought in the first battle of the American Revolution was not erected until ten years after the end of the Civil War. When individual heroes were still honored, they might now be depicted alongside their men, as in the Shaw Memorial. The epitome of this trend in Civil War iconography was the Grant Memorial across the Mall in Washington, DC from the Lincoln Memorial,

as a statue of a solitary General U.S. Grant watches on horseback two separate clusters of anonymous soldiers caught in the confusion of battle, several disconsolate, at least one in agony. As one viewer has acutely observed, “Battle emerges as a maelstrom for both the individual soldier and the viewer: neither can hope to control or even understand it” (Savage 2009, 228-236, quotation 234).

By the time the Grant Memorial was dedicated in 1922, it also represented a response to a more recent conflagration, the world war that had ended four years earlier. However, probably because US casualties had been significantly lower than the death tolls of other major combatants, it has received relatively little memorial attention in America, particularly in comparison with Britain, which for the first time named individual victims as the United States had half a century earlier and memorialized the unburied but named missing among the million dead at the Somme in the moving Thiepval Memorial of 1927 (Laqueur 1994; Hass 1998, 53-58; Doss 2010, 151). World War II also did not initially receive the same level of national commemoration as the Civil War, although for a different reason than World War I: the spirit of the age preferred “living memorials” – hospitals, museums, libraries, parks, auditoriums, bridges, airports – in which the living could interact, in place of what many considered lifeless statuary stained by pompous rhetoric as dead as the men allegedly honored by their erection (Bodnar 2010, 94-98; Doss 2010, 192-193). Only after the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would the veterans of World War II and the “forgotten war” in Korea receive their own memorials.

The creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) in the National Mall near the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument in Washington DC was a turning point in the evolution not only of war memorials, but also of the broader phenomenon of public commemoration of widescale death in America. It is easy now to forget the angry rhetoric from some circles that greeted Maya Yang Lin’s winning design in 1981. To some proud pro-war veterans it represented what one called “a black gash of shame and sorrow, hacked into the national visage that is the mall.” To add injury to insult, Lin only got a B for the design in her undergraduate seminar on funerary architecture at Yale (Hass 1998,

14-16, quotation on 16). But Lin won a more important and enduring response from the public, more than four million of whom walk in mostly silent procession along the memorial's pathway every year (Doss 2010, 127; Janiskee 2010; Greenspan 2012).

The embrace of the VVM by the American people was appropriate in the sense that it was not a US government project in its inception or funding as previous monuments and memorials erected after a war had been, but rather originated with Jay Scruggs, a war veteran struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. Scruggs wanted to help extend the personal healing process that Michael Cimino's 1978 film *The Deer Hunter* began for him to other individuals across the nation for whom the war had too closely resembled the gaping hole in the earth's texture that is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Lin's design. Although negotiations with the Ronald Reagan administration were necessary to win a place on the national mall (the veto power of the Secretary of the Interior led to the most radical, and to many minds superfluous, adjustments to Lin's original design, the addition of a mammoth flagpole and of conventional statuary of three US soldiers across from the monument), the key decisions about the project remained in the hands of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund founded by Scruggs in 1979. Among the most important instructions to the entrants and jury for the design competition were that the memorial somehow include the names of all the war dead, and that it avoid any political statement about the war, in order, in Scruggs' words, to "begin a healing process, a reconciliation of the grievous dissensions wrought by the war" (Hass 1998, 9-13, quotation on 13; Savage 2009, 267, on Scruggs' PTSD).

Lin envisioned, on a black V-shaped wedge rising from the earth, then falling back into it, names listed not alphabetically or by rank, but simply in the order in which they died. The individuality of the dead was respected, while the individual emotional response of the viewer was solicited: "Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss," she explained. "For death is in the end a personal and private matter, and the area contained within this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning" (Hass 1998, 14-15; quotation in Savage

2009, 271). The contemplative space she designed helps explain why, though both pro-war and anti-war forces have congregated there and politicians like President Reagan have attempted to shanghai the VVM in the service of traditional ideals of military valor and sacrifice, it remains for most viewers what Scruggs and Lin intended, the site of what Kirk Savage has called "the nation's first 'therapeutic' memorial... made expressly to heal a collective psychological injury" (Doss 2010, 131; Savage 2009, 267). The early attacks on the VVM were misplaced, for neither the founding spirit nor the designer of the memorial sought or desired to make an antiwar statement. As Savage has noted, for Lin, "The break with tradition was more fundamental: her memorial avoided delivering any message. The meaning was to be generated by the viewers themselves, in their experience of the place" (Savage 2009, 267). Or as Scruggs phrased it, "The memorial says exactly what we wanted to say about Vietnam – absolutely nothing" (Doss 2010, 130).

The VVM symbolized two important shifts in American memorialization. First, it sprang from the very community it commemorated, in this case the Vietnam vets, in a statement of identity and a claim on the broader public consciousness. Second, in a city of power brokers, the VVM implicitly focused on the powerless – on individuals whose destinies were determined by politicians, draft boards, their superior officers, their often unseen adversaries, and luck. In some sense of the word, everyone dies a victim, whether of disease, or another individual's decisions, or their own psychological demons, or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, by focusing without rhetorical flourishes on more than 58,000 unchosen deaths on particular days in a far-off country, "was the capital's first true victim monument.... Maya Lin's design has bequeathed to us a therapeutic model of commemoration that has become the new common sense of our era" (Savage 2009, 266).

The third of a century since the unveiling of the VVM in November 1982 has revealed just how significant it would be in shaping American attitudes towards death, trauma, and their commemoration. Over the past three decades the United States has undergone what one professor of American Studies has called, in the title of her recent book, *Memorial Mania*. She noted how suddenly the

landscape had become dotted with “thousands of new memorials to executed witches, enslaved Africans, victims of terrorism, victims of lynching, dead astronauts, aborted fetuses, and murdered teenagers... along with those that pay tribute to civil rights activists, cancer survivors, organ donors, Rosie the Riveter, U.S. soldiers in any number of wars, U.S. presidents, the end of Communism, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Indian victors of the Battle of Little Bighorn” (Doss 2010, 1).

Many of these memorials have been, like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, assertions of identity and of a group’s claim on the national conscience and remembrance, even if the victimizers lived in other countries (the Irish Famine memorials in Boston and New York City, or, in Washington, the Holocaust Museum and the Victims of Communism Memorial). The victimization need not even have involved unnatural deaths. The Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism, dedicated in November 2000, tries to force other Americans to acknowledge a national moral failure in establishing internment camps for citizens of Japanese ethnicity during World War II (“Here We Admit a Wrong,” reads an inscription) (Savage 2009, 284-294). Others return to past wars to reclaim for their veterans the same honored place in the national consciousness that the VVM won for those who served in Vietnam. In these cases, however, the politics involved, especially the ostentatious gratitude toward the “greatest generation” in World War II memorials, have usually de-emphasized the victim status of the veterans, except in rare instances like the local memorials in Kentucky, Wisconsin, and New Mexico to National Guardsmen who succumbed to or endured the Bataan Death March (Savage 2009, 298-306; Doss 2010, 194-221; Bodnar 2010, 107-129). Other memorials sought to contextualize national political traumas through memorials at the sites of major assassinations (Fagin 2013). Many of the most notable, however, have memorialized the unarmed and innocent victims of terrorism. The first was the memorial to the 168 individuals, including many children at a day care center, killed in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in an act of domestic terrorism in 1995 (Linenthal 2001). More controversial, perhaps because the trauma touched so many, have been the 9/11 monuments in New

York City, Washington, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania, especially the long, uncertain path to the somewhat antiseptic serenity of the 9/11 Memorial and Memorial Museum on the site of the twin towers of the World Trade Building (Goldberger 2005, 204-270; Doss 2010, 137-147; Greenspan 2013, 117-144, 179-192, 205-220; Gopnik 2014).

Whatever their individual excellences, few of these post-VVM installations have generated the kind of emotional bond between viewers and memorial that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial established from the start. Although calling for introspection, Lin’s wall also invites interaction, including touching the names, while friends, family, and soon complete strangers left mementoes and offerings – medals, letters, Bibles, cans of beer, teddy bears, poems – some of which were later collected in a museum exhibition. The raw emotion displayed by the “tokens of remembrance,” as they are usually called, is often heartbreaking (Hass 1998). Although one may doubt whether even she could have anticipated the extent of the emotional outpouring at the VVM Wall, Lin welcomed the phenomenon. “I really did mean for people to cry,” she explained (Doss 2010, 129). Her design allowed a catharsis for many viewers that to date none of the memorials built in reaction to the Wall have equaled, or even approached.

III

The evolution of public commemoration of large-scale death in the United States raises questions that others may wish to consider in reacting to comparable events in their own countries. In South Korea, for example, the national trauma after the *Sewol* tragedy would seem to call for a memorial response as both remembrance and catharsis. There are enough shared values and similarities in social and political development to merit a deeper look at the ideals and attitudes shaping commemorative practices in America.

To start with, from the Civil War forward public commemoration of death in America has been shaped by a Romantic attitude toward death that calls for contemplation amidst, then in place of overt grief. Tears should eventually end,

but not reflection. The post-Christian approach to the newly dead moved burial from the churchyard to the “cemetery,” a Greek term for “resting place” that first came into wide use in English in the decades immediately before the Civil War. The Romantic sensibility called for self-scrutiny by individuals mulling the significance of death and the meaning of life while strolling through landscapes evocative of both. As a result several of the early cemeteries, especially two in Massachusetts, Mt. Auburn Cemetery on the Cambridge border and Sleepy Hollow in Concord, were among the first parks in America, enticing visitors to commune with nature on paths meandering among the gravestones. The design of the burial ground for the fallen soldiers at Gettysburg was entrusted to one of the participants in the antebellum rural cemetery movement (Wills 1992, 63-79; Hass 1998, 51-53, 66-71).

This heritage directly links the sensibility behind the Soldiers’ National Cemetery at Gettysburg with the vision conceiving the Vietnam Veterans Memorial dedicated almost 120 years later. Thoughtful contemplation in a restful environment intentionally designed to foster thoughts about human mortality is inherently passive, but potentially transformative. Thus, for Maya Lin, memorials were not “stages where you act out, but rather spaces where something happens within the viewer” (Savage 2009, 270). The Vietnam War was the most contentious military conflict in American history with the exception of the Civil War. At Gettysburg and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall, as Lincoln hoped, as Jan Scruggs and Maya Lin planned, personal catharsis in contemplating unnecessary death allowed a measure of personal and, then in aggregate, national healing. With proper planning, a permanent memorial remembering the *Sewol* tragedy may someday yield a similar transformation.

A second recurring theme in American memorials, the recent emphasis on victimization, probably has parallels to the queasy feeling among members of modern society that, despite our expectations, we are seldom in real control of the trajectory of our lives. Psychological trauma at preventable death only deepens the bruises already present by associating feelings of acute new pain with past sensations of helplessness. These sentiments seem to have gradually embedded themselves in our consciousness over the past century. The twinned

concepts of trauma and victimization only began to reach their current ascendancy over the past forty years or so, which is another reason for the importance of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the American mind. As recently as 1931 the *Titanic* Memorial erected in Washington, DC to commemorate the losses when the *Titanic* sank in 1912 focused not on the 1,500 victims but on the heroism of the handful of men who allegedly died in allowing women and children to be saved first. It is telling that, despite the interest in recent decades in the disaster, the official *Titanic* memorial has been moved from its original site near the Lincoln Memorial to a less spectacular site in southwest Washington, and is now largely unvisited and forgotten (Savage 2009, 242-244; Doss 2010, 47).

Another reason why the *Titanic* memorial does not fit with contemporary concerns is that, while human hubris and error played a role in the ship’s destruction, the immediate cause of death was not a human action but rather an act of nature: an iceberg calved off Greenland riding the North Atlantic currents southward to its rendezvous with the ocean liner. Despite some gains in recent centuries humans have never been in real control of the natural processes on which their lives and livelihood have depended, but they expect more cooperation from other humans, and react in anger and frustration when others interfere in their lives. For that reason, though tsunamis, hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes have ripped millions of individuals from life, most memorials are to the losses directly attributable to the actions of other human beings: we memorialize the 37 million individuals who died due to human decisions in World War I, not the 50 to 100 million who died around the world due to exposure to a particularly potent virus in the contemporaneous influenza epidemic of 1918. In today’s environment the flu victims would probably have received a monument of some sort, but it would almost certainly not have a significant claim on our attention. This is demonstrated by the fate of the thoughtful memorial to Hurricane Katrina victims constructed in downtown New Orleans in 2006, the existence of which is little known even to many residents of the city (Yelp 2014). From this perspective, we can consider the *Sewol* tragedy a prime candidate for memorializing. If the deaths from the sinking of the *Titanic* and

the destruction of much of New Orleans were natural disasters augmented by human mistakes, the *Sewol* tragedy was the direct result of irresponsible human actions before and after the ferry encountered the tortuous currents off southwestern Korea.

In evaluating the social factors at work in the public commemoration of the sudden, untimely deaths of multiple ordinary citizens, the experience of democratization also has aspects meriting a closer, deeper look. It is the shared membership in a community as individuals connected with one another yet demanding attention as persons equally worthy of respect and deserving of the long, full lives that are now denied to them that is the hallmark of modern memorials. But democratization has other implications as well. One corollary seems to be an increasingly blurred distinction between public and private in modern life. There are aspects of this development that may trouble many of us, yet we must also acknowledge that it allows the public expression of individual emotions that would otherwise remain incoherent and unacknowledged. Participation in the public commemoration of the deaths of complete strangers allows a shared catharsis for not simply the immediate losses, but for all the deaths of loved ones we all experience or at least fear, as well as other traumatic moments in our lives.

We also need to remember, though, that “public” is not a monolithic antithesis to the “private” – that all of us participate in a variety of publics of varying size and complexity. We may view a massive loss of life as a national tragedy, yet we also experience them within the mindset of the familial, political, religious, workplace, and other communities of which we are a part. These publics may generate countercurrents that undercut communal feelings of grief. In Korea, for example, the search for responsibility for the loss of some 300 lives drowned when the *Sewol* sank quickly became politicized. Six months after the tragedy the fractious, still unresolved debates led to a headline in the *New York Times*, “Ferry Disaster That United South Korea Now Polarizes It” (Choe 2014). The existence of multiple publics with conflicting interests and agendas also helps explain the controversies and delays regarding the memorializing of 9/11 in downtown Manhattan. Even the victims’ families at times divided depending on

whether their lost ones died working in or visiting one of the buildings affected, walking beside them, flying as passengers in the planes that were crashed into the twin towers, or rushing to assist other victims as “first responders.” They could never come together as the smaller, more cohesive, locally based network of families did as the single force directing memorial activities after the terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City (Linenthal 2001; Goldberger 2005; Greenspan 2013).

And yet, even if the process of creating permanent memorials proved more confused and divisive than anyone who endured the agony of the 2001 terrorist attacks could have predicted, visitors have streamed to the National September 11 Memorial since ticketing and reservation restrictions to control crowds at what remained until recently a construction site ended in May 2014 (Dunlap 2014). Although the memorial itself may not reach the Maya Lin-level of simplicity and eloquence to which it aspired, the experience for many of the individuals standing beside it seems to have become a comparable rite of purification. After all, as we have seen, the VVM itself was no stranger to early controversy. The need for catharsis can render trivial many obstacles in its path. Also, although the existence of alternative publics can polarize, it can also fuse people into larger wholes. Most memorials over the past century and a half have been national in scope, for obvious if sometimes unfortunate reasons. Even the Vietnam Veterans Memorial draws a more specifically American audience than the nearby Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial. Arguably the only modern commemorative construction to have become a truly global phenomenon is the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Certainly any *Sewol* memorial would inevitably draw a largely Korean audience, not only because coverage in the Korean media made it a national event, but also because the failures of planning and execution that led to such a large death toll stemmed from what seemed at the time specifically Korean practices and attitudes. Yet the mourning was not restricted to Korea. If my personal experience is any indication of broader trends, over the weeks while bodies were beginning to be brought to the surface, many foreigners sent emails to friends in Korea expressing not simply their condolences, but their feelings of personal sorrow and distress at the deaths of so many young people cut off before they could complete the journey from

childhood to adulthood. The creation of a larger public sharing grief is itself a source of personal catharsis. A thoughtful memorial can transcend boundaries between people, at the same time that it breaches the gulf between life and death in the consciousness of all of us who are, only temporarily, their survivors.

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