
Introduction

This book is about the importance of cemeteries in the lives of everyday mourners, and ways in which our bereaved give meaning to and draw value from their commemorative activities.

The death of someone dear to us is the most momentous life event that we are likely to ever experience. And in predominantly Christian societies, visiting the grave or memorial is a most common behavioral response to bereavement. Memorial sites provide vital connections to our deceased loved ones with whom we wish to maintain ongoing social bonds, and cemeteries are crucial places of deep healing and growth.

Literally millions of visits are made to cemeteries every day, but the extent of this activity and its personal values have long remained largely unrecognized. In opening up this issue, this volume represents an important contribution to contemporary knowledge of the phenomena of bereavement, mourning, and commemoration.

Large urban memorial parks are virtual hives of activity by recently bereaved persons, and they hold a place among the most visited places in Western communities. Some cemeteries, hosting literally millions of annual visits, are evidently more popular than many major tourist attractions.

Cemetery visitation is indeed a high-participatory, value-laden, expressive activity, and a most significant observable behavior of the recently bereaved.

CEMETERY VALUES

Sometimes there is far too much focus on merely the economic and historic values of cemeteries, while all too often the real rationale for cemeteries and their main community values remain unrecognized.

Society does not require us to build and operate a cemetery just because of some need for another business, or specifically to provide employment. Nor

does any community establish a cemetery so that it will eventually have another historic museum.

It is well said that: “he who pays the piper calls the tune.” Today, in many Western countries, including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, the only societal groups that pay for cemetery services are those of recently bereaved families. Logically then, they would appear to be the only legitimate groups with any right to call the tune. But the outside interests of vocal minorities are often given more consideration than the genuine needs of bereaved families having quite significant financial and emotional investments in a particular cemetery.

For over two decades I have listened to and observed tens of thousands of mourners rightfully expecting cemeteries to cater for their practical, emotional, and cultural needs. To these *bona fide* stakeholders—the only ones who actually pay for the existence of facilities and provision of services—the rationale of the cemetery is none other than to provide for their personal needs.

Their initial *practical* need is for the orderly disposition of the bodily remains of a family member. *Emotional* needs include an appropriately dignified funeral, an opportunity to commemorate the decedent so that recognition will remain through and possibly beyond the mortal life of the mourners, and the provision of an appropriate locus for revisiting memories and working through grief. *Cultural* needs include opportunities to observe traditional and contemporary family, community, religious or spiritual practices in the funeral, and in memorialization and ongoing visitation.

Meeting these needs must be the rationale of any cemetery authority hoping to provide a worthwhile service to its community. And so, to be effective, cemetery operators must become intimately familiar with, and truly understand, the personal needs of those of diverse backgrounds and bereaved through various circumstances.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

On social introductions, and learning that I work in a cemetery, many have remarked that the job must be so easy because all of my clients are dead. My usual response is to inform them that they couldn't be more wrong. The deceased are not our clients; the families they leave behind are. And these survivors are not only very much alive and kicking, but often also screaming. I may go on to advise that our clients represent all nationalities and religions, come frequently in family groups at the time of greatest distress and emotional turmoil in their lives, and represent all relationships and losses through all conceivable circumstances. I might also add that we get only one chance at fully satisfying their primary service need, among those of many other families each day.

Rather than something so easily dismissed, cemetery management can be a highly challenging profession requiring the application of a range of business,

social and environmental knowledge and skills with a sensitivity not usually required in many other service industries.

Episodic threats, armed security guards, and sneaking staff out through side entrances are not within most people's concept of running a cemetery. But not wishing to present an unduly distorted image, I hasten to add that the greatest proportion of management activity is directed toward supporting grieving families within a prevailing environment of relative peace.

The naivety of unfamiliar social acquaintances is to be expected. Far more surprising was my revelation just over a decade ago that the Australian and international cemeteries industries had little idea of who their clients actually were, let alone what clients' needs might be. No specific social data existed on the people now known to be paying around 32 million annual visits to Australia's 2,300 cemeteries. And the pervading industry attitude suggested that it would be insensitive and inappropriate to subject cemetery visitors to personal scrutiny.

I now recognize a combination of factors at play in the industry's reluctance to become acquainted with its clientele. Firstly, cemetery managers saw themselves as *facility operators*, rather than *service providers*. Many remained afraid of the mysteries of death, uncomfortable with the emotions of their clients, and unfamiliar with various religious and other cultural requirements.

Maintaining clients at a good arm's length meant that we did not have to become burdened by our clients' grief. Many managers felt they lacked the skills necessary to talk to grieving clients, and this was seen as the domain of professionally trained counselors. Others considered themselves too busy running the business to get involved in what they employed others to deal with. And some just wished to avoid emotional people who complain unreasonably and seek to dump their grief on someone else.

Other managers and directors considered that their own personal bereavement experiences provided adequate insight and empathy with the experiences of others. And some felt that from their experience they knew best the needs of mourners, who should even be grateful for such caring responsible management.

Far too many of authority considered cemeteries to be merely disposal places for cadavers or just historic museums, and much legislation still reflects this. There was little if any appreciation of the major community values of cemeteries. So empirical study of cemetery visitation and visitors' values and needs was greatly overdue.

For years now I have been discovering who visits whom, when, why, and how often. I have investigated who the cemetery industry's clients are, visiting behaviors and needs, how visitation is influenced by specific social factors (including age and sex of visitors, and relationships to the deceased), and by cultural factors (including perceived nationalities and religions of families).

In response to requests from other cemeteries, and with support of the Australasian Cemeteries & Crematoria Association, I found myself coordinating

a series of studies at major cemeteries throughout Australia. And the total data were compiled to construct a national cemetery visitation profile. Collectively, the participating cemeteries provided almost 30% of all Australian burials and cremations, and the total survey sample comprised responses from 3,000 visitors.

This profile provided fascinating quantitative data on cemetery clients, from which many generalizations could be drawn. One's family religion and relationship to the decedent were found to be major determinants of visitation at all cemeteries, and the statistical significances of common social and cultural demographics were identified. However, these data revealed nothing of the personal experiences of individual mourners; this was yet to be acquired through further complementary qualitative research.

In-depth personal interviews with mourners of various religions and relationships to decedents were then conducted with informants purposively selected to approximate a cross-section of general cemetery visitors, as identified from the quantitative data. These interviews included discussion of issues such as impacts of bereavement, cemetery visitation activities, emotional experiences, and personal values of cemeteries, memorials, and visitation, across various social and cultural contexts.

Sorrow and solace were identified as the main groups of emotions experienced in association with cemetery visitation; and these emotions were found to be not necessarily exclusive of each other.

Sorrow & Solace: The Social World of the Cemetery presents major findings of these studies, offering fresh insights into practical bereavement and common personal values of the cemetery to those working their way through grief.

STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Sorrow & Solace: The Social World of the Cemetery comprises three main parts. Part A lays a contextual foundation for the original research findings to be introduced later on. This first part reviews the evolution of the modern cemetery environment, looks at contemporary death, current concepts of bereavement and grief, and the research methods employed in the studies on which Parts B and C are based.

Part B presents major findings of a unique quantitative visitation study, and identifies the volume of visits, common visitation patterns, and the significance of common social and cultural attributes within cemetery visitation.

Part C then presents key findings of a qualitative bereavement study, and identifies personal values of the cemetery to mourners of diverse backgrounds. Major reasons for visitation and non-visitation, specific activities and emotions of visitors, and issues relating to common frequencies of visitation

are all considered. Finally, key values of the cemetery to most mourners are identified.

I sincerely hope that this volume will help widely extend common understanding of contemporary bereavement and the needs of those who mourn. The work represents a significant reference for those seeking a broader understanding of longer-term practical bereavement; and it will be of particular value in guiding those in the caring professions and support services toward helping millions of mourners each year through the most difficult period of their lives.