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The Body of the Soul and the Soul of the Body



The graveyard and home memorial as part of the rite of passage and performing the function of the transitional object

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Foreword

In February 2005, one of my best girlfriends, Carla, was diagnosed with cancer. The doctors told her that they wouldn't be able to do anything to help her getting healed.

Together with another girlfriend, Meta, I was sitting next to Carla when the doctors informed her about it. It was clear for all three of us that Carla would not be left alone walking the difficult path managing her cancer and knowing that death was close.

From that moment on we formed a close community, trying to deal with the coming death of Carla. She passed away in July 2005.

As a therapist, I joined a three-year-scholar program for therapists at the Center for Intentional Living. For the last three years I have been studying Religious Science at the University of Nijmegen in Holland.

To finish one of the assignments I had to observe a graveyard and talked to someone on how to build up a memorial place in their own house for a beloved person who had passed away.

This article is in the first place the result of a very intensive personal time, three years of wonderful teachings from Alexis Johnson and Judith Schmidt, the Directors at the Center for Intentional Living and secondly my studies at the University of Nijmegen (Holland) where the teachings of Dr. Erix Venbrux stimulated and encouraged me to bring personal experience, psychological knowledge and theory together

Introduction

The graveyard I visited as part of this assignment was very much a dead place. There is no sign of active mourning, and I realised later that that is fairly unusual for a graveyard. I asked the local minister about the history of the graveyard and that is when I found out that it was no longer in use and that the graves had been removed around 50 years ago. The original memorial stones had been left there as a mark of respect. I experienced a great contrast to this when, further to my assignment regarding home memorials, I interviewed my friend, Meta, about her memorial for our mutual friend who had died.

Having a memorial at home gives the impression that the dead have very much been kept alive. The deceased had a permanent place in daily life and the memorial is a place with which and through which an individual can communicate with the deceased.

These are two completely opposite experiences of how death and the dead are dealt with. At least, that's how it seemed at first. So, what did these two observations have in common? At first glance, not a great deal. The dead had been removed from the graveyard and the gravestones were serving as a reminder of them. In the second instance the deceased was still fully present in the lives of the living.

In both instances there was respect for the dead. Even if a grave is emptied, a memorial to that which was once there remains.

The private memorial is evidence of respect and a personal connection to the deceased. Both instances revealed a clear portrait of the age. The emptied graves dated back to the nineteenth century. The wording on the graves contained references to going to God, resting in the arms of God, the last resting-place and references to resurrection on the day of judgement. These are plain gravestones which do justice to the era in which the reformed church in Thun still formed a thriving community.

The home memorial is evidence of a time in which God is no longer referred to as God, but as the light or a place which is difficult to identify. The dead person is not on or in a final resting-place, but still active at another level. There is a dynamic image of the whereabouts and role of the dead person. In an age when the church is no longer the chosen place for practising religion, death and the dead are clearly going elsewhere too. People are developing their own individual religious feelings in relation to death.

I found that both the gravestones and the home memorial operated as monuments and symbols. The gravestones which once fulfilled the role of memorials have become monuments to a person's memory and are symbols of something that once existed.

The private memorial still fulfils both functions - commemoration and remembrance - and the objects are the symbols with which the dead person is commemorated.

The role of death and the place which death and the dead occupy in life is a prominent one. Clearly, we humans seek rituals and symbols in order to symbolise one of the most important transitions, namely from life to death.

In this paper then, I intend to concentrate on two aspects of this transition which, in my opinion, are connected. That is to say, for the living death functions as a rite of passage and, within this rite of passage, symbols such as memorial stones and memorial sites function as transitional objects for the living.

A number of observations made during the interview put me on this particular track. These had to do with the changing form of the memorial and the items on it. These changes are made over time. This brings the concept of transition and the mourning process into focus. The complete absence of any sign of mourning and how individuals deal with mourning at the former graveyard I visited reinforced this opinion. The dynamic process created all around the altar means that conversations are held with the dead and enables family and friends to have conversations about the dead. It seemed to me that the altar formed a projection of the mourning process. Here too the former graveyard was a complete contrast to this. It was virtually impossible to reflect on death because all traces of death had been removed. Nonetheless, by retaining some of the gravestones, a decision had been taken here to show that this too was a place of remembrance and mourning. To me this too symbolised a transition. People who need to work through a loss regularly come to see me in my capacity of psychotherapist, and I have noticed that people use objects to deal with the transition from life to death and to enable them to say good-bye.

I have also wondered if the complete absence of any sign of mourning does not reinforce the idea that a graveyard is actually a place for the living to think and remember and that within that process the grave could function as a transitional object.

1. Rite of Passage

Ronald Grimes notes in his book, *Deeply into the bone*, that there is no known culture which deals with its dead and death as “rubbish”. No culture simply dumps the dead in the grave. That probably says more about the living than the dead.

In every culture a dead person is treated with a certain respect and deference. Meanings are often attached to death which have to do with the place the dead person will go to after death. The words on the gravestones and the interview about the home memorial are evidence of this. But even if a person does not believe in life after death, in whatever form, the dead person is carried to the grave with some ceremony.

I do not intend to speculate in this paper about what happens to a dead person after his or her death. Rather I shall concentrate on the living, those left behind. They are the ones who produce the gravestones and memorials. Arnold van Gennep, a sociologist, developed the rite of passage theory. Van Gennep argued that people use rituals to mark important transitions in life such as birth, marriage, puberty and death. His starting point was that this phenomenon takes place across cultures, but that different cultures add their own rituals and symbols.

Important transitions in life change the social status of people; if there is a death, people will become widows, widowers or orphans, or will have to continue living without a best friend, and it is precisely the change in status that leads people to develop rituals to mark the social transitions. This rite of passage is often linked to the life-cycle of man, including death, but van Gennep believes that the concept of the rite of passage can also be applied to, for example, a calendrical rite.

A rite of passage consists of three different phases, each of which phase is marked by an individual's own approach to performing rituals. Van Gennep describes the three phases as follows:

1. the separation stage - pre-liminal phase
2. the transition phase, also called the liminal phase
3. incorporation or re-incorporation, also called the post-liminal phase.

At every stage an individual finds his own ritual for the transition. Death initially hits a person with a separation from life to death. Religion and cultural views partly determine the way in which this process is given a ritual form. The ritual is often aimed at completing the life cycle of the dead person. If a person believes in resurrection, the rituals in this initial phase will be aimed at creating as good an afterlife as possible. If a person believes that the dead turn into spirits which can still influence the living, that person will try to propitiate the deceased spirit or bury him in a place that will ensure a safe distance can be created.¹

Personal emotion will also occupy a central position during this initial phase. The cultural background will often determine how this is experienced or expressed. In our Western society it is not really normal to put on a public display of hysterical grief at a graveside. There are cultures where a public display of hysterical grief appears to be a necessity.

The sociologist Emile Durkheim came to believe that an emotional reaction to such an emotional event as death was a natural reaction, but, he believes, this reaction can to a large degree be shaped by the social context in which an individual has to deal with his or her mourning.²

¹ Bowie, Fiona, 2006, *The anthropology of religion: an introduction*. London. Blackwell Publishing

² Bowen, John R, *Religions in Practice*, 2005, Person Education, Inc.

This dealing with grief within a social context does not, of course, say a great deal about the way an individual deals psychologically with mourning and with the reaction to the separation caused by the death.

3. The transition phase in the rite of passage

In my view, my findings, made during the observations at the graveyard and the interview with someone who has set up a home memorial, cannot yet be placed in this initial phase. Gravestones and the inscriptions on gravestones are usually conceived and positioned after some time has passed. The home memorial is not part of a ritual carried out immediately after death but only after the funeral. Van Gennep works on the premise that individuals move into the transition phase after the separation phase. This phase is characterised by the fact that the person no longer has the old status, but has not yet acquired a new one.

The death of a person puts the individual left behind in a different position or status from before. A person is suddenly no longer a wife or husband, at least not to the outside world, and the girlfriend who dies leaves behind a space which cannot immediately be filled. The father or mother who dies confronts the child, even if that child is an adult, with the fact that they are semi-orphaned or orphaned. It is as though the person left behind is existing in a vacuum. Old patterns no longer work, but no new ones have yet been found. Dealing personally with the loss and mourning process are at the forefront during this phase. This can apply to an individual but also to a group.

The initiation rite is often used as an example to explain Van Gennep's structure. When a group due to undergo the initiation rite separates from everyday life, it will form a small community of its own in which a certain degree of solidarity, described by Victor Turner as *communitas*, will be created. Turner (1920 - 1930) describes this second phase, known as the liminal phase, as a period in which individuals are "betwixt and between". They no longer belong anywhere and they have not yet been given or adopted a new role to suit them.³

Mourning is often dealt with in a group, family, brothers and sisters, and friends. A form of *communitas* can take place within this group since all the members are affected by the same grief and that creates a feeling of solidarity. They all have to live with a loss and the person who has died is given, one way or another, another place in life. Psychological coping strategies can arise during this phase. The purpose of these strategies is to process the loss and accommodate it in everyday life. Part of these coping strategies can include the performing of a ritual. On the one hand these may be rituals which are directly linked to the death, such as the rituals carried out during a burial or cremation, i.e. directly linked to van Gennep's separation phase.

³ Michael Lambek, *A reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, 2002, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Boston

On the other hand these may be rituals of a more commemorative nature, and usually take place after the burial or cremation. Examples of this include commemorating the anniversary of a death, and reading out the name of the deceased in church.⁴

These rituals take place during what is known as the transition phase. It is not yet possible to return to everyday life, but the immediate separation phase has concluded. The transition phase as described by Turner is not bound by a particular length of time. A baptism, for example, which is, after all, a transition, is actually performed within a very limited period. Other transition periods may last longer and sometimes take weeks and even months. As for mourning, it is often difficult to say how long a period of mourning will last. A lot depends on the relationship the person left behind had with the deceased.

As a general rule, the closer the relationship the greater the time needed to work through a loss. This means a surviving relative can remain in the transition phase for a very long time and, unless the appropriate psychological coping strategies are found, these transition phases can also stagnate because the surviving relative hasn't found the right way of working through the separation and mourning.

Thomas Quartier also describes the "betwixt and between" transition phase as the phase of ritual creativity⁵. Precisely because individuals need to look for new roles during this phase to deal with the departure and have yet to find a new one, they develop a form of creativity during this phase which expresses on the one hand the loss and separation, and on the other the transition they are trying new ways to find. The psychological coping strategies which may be developed by individuals or groups such as families also contain a certain degree of ritual creativity, for example, developing a ritual by placing a gravestone, commemorating a birthday, etc. and a host of other examples.

Gravestones are erected after the separation phase and form part of the ritual required to complete the transition phase. The gravestones at the defunct churchyard in Thun are fairly uniform, as I mentioned in my introduction. The place to which the dead person was going was clear. Who the dead person had left behind, wife, husband, children or grandchildren was also clearly stated, and in many cases the social position of the deceased was also clear. The defunct churchyard gives a slightly misleading impression because a decision was made to retain some gravestones to indicate that this was once a burial ground yet the shape and wording is fairly uniform. This brings me back to Durkheim's pronouncement that emotions and rituals are also in part determined by the social context in which they are performed, in this case in the reformatory municipality of Thun.

⁴ Spilka, Bernard, *The Psychology of religion, an empirical approach*, 2003, The Guilford Press, New York

⁵ Thomas Quartier, college notes *Ritual Studies*, 15 November, 2005

The reformed church believes that the deceased shall await God's judgment. Unlike the Catholic Church, surviving relatives or the church cannot do much to change this.

To a certain extent this also determines the forms of expression individuals have at their disposal during the transition phase and the extent to which ritual creativity can be shaped. There was not a great deal of room for public acknowledgement of mourning during that period. It was up to God to pass the final judgment, and he did so. The surviving relatives played no role in this publicly. I think this view also means that a transition phase as envisaged by Victor Turner will lead to the everyday order being re-established more quickly, at least in public.

The memorial set up at home also gave a clear idea of what happened to the deceased after death, namely that he or she had gone to the light. The memorial was also an expression of the religious views of the person I interviewed. Meta was assuming that Carla was or is in a place where she has been reunited with all her loved ones who had died before her. She believed that the light or the source is also a place where the dead can develop further and can prepare for another life. The interviewee still had an active role in the process relating to the ups and downs of her friend, even after her death.

The psychological coping strategy in the transition phase was aimed much more at dealing publicly with grief and accommodating the death in the life she has to live. The altar also encouraged her to continue to talk often about the dead person and her relationship with her to family and friends confronted by the altar. In this sense the altar helps to create the feeling of *communitas* which can arise during the transition phase, named and developed by Victor Turner. The setting up of an altar for the dead friend is evidence of a creative, ritualistic interpretation of the transition phase. After the death and separation, the interviewee looked for a way of dealing with this which suited her idea of religion.

4. Death and the transitional object

Unlike the gravestones in the Thun churchyard, the memorial was a very dynamic and living entity. There was communication with the person who had died and there was scope for the deceased to communicate. The altar, which is how the interviewee described her memorial, was also a monument designed to express the deep solidarity typified by the relationship between the dead and surviving relatives. The altar was directly linked to the spiritual growth of both the deceased and the survivor. The dynamic and creative process behind the erection of the altar and the place it occupies is also linked to the stage reached in the mourning process.

The altar was set up after the funeral, i.e. after the immediate separation period and is on public display within the private environment. It also offers the opportunity to talk to others about the death and the impact this death has had and is continuing to have in the everyday life of the interviewee. It was clear that the altar had a part to play in the mourning process. In this sense, then, this is a transition period in which the altar functions as a commemoration and memorial which helps her to say goodbye, little by little, to the person who has died, and is connected to the religious views of the interviewee.

This coping strategy could also be compared to Winnicott's transitional object theory. Winnicott, a British educationalist, developed his transitional object theory having observed children who appear to need items or objects in order to realise that a separation is taking place. Separation from a relatively safe situation, the mother, to a relatively unsafe situation, enables a child gradually to let go of the mother. A step towards greater independence is taken during the development process. Winnicott worked on the premise that a separation phase occurs during each development phase of a child, and that during this separation a child again looks for an object which can make the relatively unsafe situation safer. During this development phase the child moves on from objects to a transitional place. That is to say, the child abandons objects and creates images of parents in a space which must create the sensation of the permanence and reliability of an existing relationship. In the case of a child that is now an adult the parents can be represented by friends or an authority.

According to Winnicott, transitional objects form the basis for the experience of and are a spur to the experience of greater independence. The transitional object appears to perform a bridging function being, on the one hand, the product of the imagination, and on the other, part of subjective desires. They become roles within which and with which a child can communicate. According to Winnicott, this has to do not only with satisfaction and a quest for security, but also forms the basis for a healthy adult.⁶

In the book *The Birth of the Living God* A.M. Rizutto uses this theory of the transitional object in her analysis of the images individuals create of God and how individuals continue to use this religious image, including in and through symbols, throughout their lives.

Rizutto adds the theory of the object-relational image to the transitional object theory. These are the images of others which are important to a person with whom there is a significant relationship.

⁶ Winnicott, D.W. *Holding and Interpretation*, 1986, Grove Press, New York

According to Rizzuto, object-relational images are complex memory processes which can arise in any development phase. These processes integrate experiences with other people important to this person.⁷

In his book *Religions in Practice* John R. Bowen describes Nancy Scheper-Hughes's research among Brazilian, Catholic mothers who have lost their young children, often as babies. According to Scheper, the rituals performed involve a form of survival strategy in the truly appalling conditions in which these mothers have to raise their children. Many children die very young through lack of good food and water and in great poverty.

On the basis of her observations, Scheper says that the mothers see the children as transitional objects after the funeral rituals. In Catholic Brazil young children are seen as angels and in this sense a blessing. There is someone speaking up for them with God in heaven. The ability to see the dead children as angels and therefore as transitional objects, in fact gave the mothers permission to let the children go. It was a way of coping with the mourning and grief. We could also perceive in this way the memorial set up inside the house and maybe even the gravestones which still serve as a place of recollection.

5. The transition phase, the transitional object, the graveyard and the home memorial.

The interview I conducted and the information I obtained from it have reinforced for me my idea that the erection of a memorial has to do with a person being in a transition phase and at the same time dealing with mourning with the aid of a transitional object. As I have already said in the introduction, a number of things Meta said during my interview with her put me on this track. I shall now develop the interview using the theories described in chapters 2 and 3 relating to the rite of passage, paying particular attention to the transition phase and the transitional object theory.

The death of a loved one results in separation. This has to be dealt with and, in general, this takes place during a mourning process. Various rituals can help during the mourning process to accommodate the separation from a loved one in everyday life. Initially, this happens when the person is buried or cremated. As I have already noted, these rituals are still often linked to the belief and/or culture and/or belief in the transition the dead person must undergo. The separation phase is often focussed more on the deceased and less on those left behind.

⁷ Rizzuto, Ana-Maria, *The birth of the living God, a psychoanalytic study*, 1979, The University of Chicago press, Chicago

In a secular society we see these rituals becoming increasingly personalised. More and more surviving relatives are deciding themselves the arrangements for a burial or cremation and which rituals should accompany them.

The transition phase begins following the rituals that take place during the separation period.

This ritual shaping of the period after the separation from a loved one could be seen as what is known as the transition phase. I believe that here too more and more people need to find their own rituals to express a mourning process during this period of transition. At a time when the church or the established religious institutions no longer meet the needs of individuals, but religious feelings are actually increasing, people seem to find it virtually a necessity to look for their own means of expression.⁸ I think setting up an altar or memorial at home may be one such means of expression.

In the interview with Meta she also provided some very specific information. This is a verbatim account of what she said: *“Because I was so closely involved with Carla when she became ill, and throughout her illness and subsequent death, there was a hole in my everyday life after she died. The need to set up a place didn’t come from a need to remember her, but was much more a need to express this deep connection, the wordless process that had developed during the months we were together.”*

Separation is a fact, but it’s difficult to re-adapt to everyday life. The old role has gone but it is not yet clear what the new one is to be. One of the most important features of the transition phase in the rite of passage is expressed here by the setting up of a memorial.

Later in the interview Meta explains that the positioning of and changes to the altar enabled her and her relatives to talk about the dead friend again. The interviewee linked the changes to the altar directly to her approach to mourning and went on to say that these changes are also connected to an internal transformation of this mourning process: *“Now, eight months on, the large colour photograph has been replaced by a smaller black-and-white one in a frame, the angel and the candles are still there but once in a while I might not replace the flowers. Now, after eight months, photographs of other relatives can go on the altar as well. I think this also has to do with the way in which the mourning process is progressing. At first the altar filled the emptiness in me and now, as the months go on, there is more of Carla in me.”*

⁸ Jansen, Jacques, Nederland als religieuze proeftuin (Holland as a religious test ground), second series Geestelijke gezondheid (Spiritual health) part 2-53, 1998, KSGV, Nijmegen

In this extract from the interview the transition is described as coming from the outside, as it were. After the separation there was a void which needed to be filled. The void which the friend had left behind had to be dealt with. Setting up an altar can set in motion a process leading to the void being removed by accommodating it in the everyday life of the person left behind.

A transition phase, such as one that occurs as part of a psychological process, is also a healthy part of the mourning process, in other words the surviving relative manages to accommodate the deceased in his or her everyday life as time goes on. The interviewee has the following to say: *"I can imagine the altar as it is now disappearing, but not altogether. Maybe the flower will disappear, or maybe it will no longer be just for Carla. The heart of the altar, the angel and the photograph will remain. In time maybe objects will be placed on it so that we continue to remember - memories of living moments. I have no idea how this is going to unfold. I do think that the first anniversary of her death will be a significant day - then the circle will be complete. The date is important but is not a reason to do away with the altar. It could be the first impetus for this"*

The gravestones at the defunct graveyard in Thun are, I think, much more tenuously linked to the transition phase in the rite of passage theory. I should perhaps note that keeping a few stones in honour of the memory of the dead could constitute a transition. Those in charge could have decided to turn the space surrounding the church into a park and leave no commemorative monuments there.

The transition from a former graveyard and conversion of this graveyard into a park, with the gravestones functioning as a memorial could draw our attention to the transitory nature of life. For me it is an indication that dead people are not simply put out with the rubbish but are part of a culture in which death and dealing with death is handled in a certain way.

Looking at a home memorial and gravestones in the light of the transition object theory, I believe that both fulfil a role here - both the memorial, being very prominent, and the gravestones which aren't actually gravestones any more.

The stones illustrate a particular view of death and the place to which the dead go after death. The deliberate decision to leave some stones standing is evidence to me of a certain respect for the dead and their last resting-place, but it is also a constant reminder to the living of the end of that life. In this sense the gravestones could function as a transitional object. Every time I see the gravestones I am confronted by my own mortality and forced to think about my own ideas and views and, possibly, fear of death.

The stones reflect, as it were, the situation I ultimately have to face, namely death, because that is a fact which every living being has to deal with consciously or unconsciously.

The altar set up after the death of the friend clearly has a role as a transitional object during the transition phase of the rite of passage theory. The interviewee made this very clear in a number of places in the interview.

Just as the mothers in Brazil see their dead children angels in heaven in Nancy Scheper's account, for the interviewee the altar is a place of reflection and a place which offers some structure for the loss. She has the following to say about this during the interview: *"The candles stand for the light where she is now; the candles also help me to make a closer connection with her light world. The photograph is the face in which I can see my own reflection. The angel is there both because she left it to me and because it stands for the emotional value of the process. Angels are the link between the material and immaterial world. The rose stands for harmony and Carla's beauty - a beauty and harmony which Carla clearly tried to bring into her life. The stones, mainly crystals, are on the altar because they'll be able to provide her with energy on her road ahead."*

It is clear here that the altar is a place with which and through which an individual's own beliefs and ideas and the road ahead of the deceased are reflected. This is also a link in the form of reflection between the world which once was, namely the world in which the deceased was still alive and the world as it is now, a world in which the deceased is no longer there. It seems as though the altar is offering security, to ensure that the link which once existed will not disappear altogether. The safe world in which everything was still as it should be, where there was no illness and death, and the unsafe world where illness and, ultimately, death has taken away a much-loved person.

This impression is reinforced by the following quote from the interview in which the relationship between the altar and the interviewee's own fear of death becomes clear: *"The altar represents the religious idea that life is not a linear line. Carla's death has reduced the worldly fear of death, of my own death. To me, religion means a deep confidence that there is a source outside of me, an order that is considerably larger than me, but which can make itself known through me. The source reflects in me and makes itself known in me and is therefore reflected in me. The altar for Carla has the same structure. Carla can make herself known via the altar. I can't make out her light without the reflection of the altar. I don't make a point of appearing there and she may or may not reveal herself. The altar and my religion have a similar sort of image."*

Here the altar clearly emerges as a transition object. The reflection of the individual and the beloved lost one is reflected via and in the altar and provides a signal of security; security which offers comfort but which, unlike the grave, can create a very meaningful relationship, characterised by a much deeper intimacy.

The theory of the transitional object and creation of a transitional space focuses in particular on the fact that the person creates an object and consequently images which offer safety in dealing with a situation which is difficult to handle or process. Individuals opt for a survival strategy resulting from a very healthy desire to survive.

This survival strategy can be moulded into a projection, an object and/or a space. According to Rizutto, the object-relational theory presupposes a certain degree of trust and also offers the opportunity to confront the loss. The object-relational theory presupposes that an individual can lose something important or that he or she may say goodbye to something for ever. This way the distance created by the separation can be bridged temporarily during a period of transition.

Here is a final excerpt from the interview to illustrate how this home memorial can function as a bridge and projection:

“It’s mad, but as I said earlier, the altar is a bridge between the material world, my world, and the immaterial world, Carla’s world. It is a meeting-place in which we can find ourselves at the same time, albeit not at the same level. The frequency and transition of the two of us come together in or on the altar. Forms of beauty and harmony can meet one another here. This is the place where the two of us are allowed “to be”. The connection we developed and where we were happy and proud can once more be seen on the altar. The transience is also evident in the changes in or to the altar, but I also have the feeling that this is in line with the phases of working through the death and the mourning process. It also helps me to be reminded that a time will come when I will see her again. In this sense a transition has, therefore, been completed.”

6. Conclusions

It is, of course, always tricky to draw conclusions on the basis of a single interview and an observational study. The experiences I have gained in the course of my everyday work have already reinforced this feeling. It sent me off in a certain direction and I have tried to develop this in this article. In a society which is becoming increasingly secularised, but in which religious feelings are occupying an important position, it seems pretty logical for people to look for ways of expressing these religious feelings. The big contrast between the words on the gravestones and the erection of the home memorial and accompanying explanation of it, suggest this to me. In this sense death and the rituals associated with death are also linked to changing beliefs within a culture.

Durkheim and Nancy Scheper too have enabled me to see that the expression of emotions must be placed in the social and cultural context in which they can be made. The prevailing values and norms are largely observed. When these norms and values are in a twilight zone, such as in our Western, secularised society, it seems fairly logical for people to look for their own way of expressing these emotions. In this sense it's not just the home altar which could be seen as an example of this, but also the silent marches which are organised as an expression of loss and protest against forms of senseless violence.

In this sense I can see the home altar as an individual expression of an emotion linked to death and dealing with death.

This individual expression also offers the opportunity to share in private with others the feeling of *communitas*, and not be left alone to deal with grief.

The use of objects and symbols which help individuals to deal with death seems entirely logical. It is a talent individuals have which enables them to encapsulate in a symbol something not immediately explicable - to make the invisible visible, and thus make bearable the necessary emotional transition.

In the end it doesn't matter whether the symbols are proclaiming a truth; after all, we can speculate over whether the words on the gravestones are accurate or whether the altar really does function as a direct line of communication. The important thing is that individuals are clearly developing strategies within the context of their culture and/or religion to enable them to mark such an important transition as the loss of a loved one.

I actually like the thought of transitional objects being able help substantially when individuals in a transition phase are trying to accommodate a loss and looking for new roles in everyday life.

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