

Death Narratives: A Key Component of Enduring Personal and Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

A person's life narrative exists independent of physical identity and as a result lives on after death while continuing to exert influence on individuals and the cultural identity of a society. Research gathered from psychology and anthropology, interviews with funeral professionals, and eye-witness accounts of ethnic funerals, highlight the importance of the Death Narrative and how it facilitates the grieving process. In addition, narrative theory provides a framework for establishing the importance of the Death Narrative. The Death Narrative of the deceased, as formulated for the funeral rites, plays a critical role in bridging the transitional stage between life and death. The narrative identity of an individual while living is composed of a multi-faceted, continually evolving story, which reaches its conclusion at the time of death. Narrative theory implies that a person's entire story can never be fully told. Incorporating and sharing the memories and anecdotes of others, as well as using culturally recognizable symbols throughout the funeral rites creates new stories as well as reinterpretations of old ones. These transform the narrative of the deceased and shape new memories for individuals, thereby adding to the collective memory and cultural identity of the society. My research concludes that the story of the deceased's life must be summarized to invoke their truest essence at the time of the death ritual in order to become incorporated into society in the context of their new identity as ancestor.

Keywords: narrative theory, death narrative, funeral rites, collective memory, identity, cultural identity

Most of us have a sense of what events will take place in our lives, and in what order from birth through death these milestones will occur. Birthdays, coming of age, graduating from school, joining the workforce, marriage, children, old age, and finally death are expected in the normal course of a person's lifetime. We are continually viewing, evaluating and editing the memories of these events to create narrative stories. Our perspectives on what has worth, value and meaningfulness may change as new experiences shape our consciousness. We repeatedly tell these stories to ourselves and others through a lens of what we feel is appropriate to recount at the time, depending on our audience. With the passage of time additional elements may be added or deleted as our image of our own identity evolves. These stories become infused with familial and cultural elements that all contribute to our narrative identity. According to Masterton, Hansson and Hoglund (2010), "we understand ourselves in relation to others and the outside world, the stories we tell ourselves, the stories we tell others about ourselves, and the stories others tell about us. By telling our story, our identity is created and re-created and we look at ourselves through the other" (p. 341-342).

Erikson (1964) originally defined identity as the answer we each give to the question "Who am I?" The answer is found through a process of "triple book-keeping" which allows the individual to reconcile the biological, psychological and social aspects of self. It is the way we sort and assemble our answers and tell the stories to others that make up our personal narrative.

Personal narratives exist independent of physical identity and as a result live on after death and continue to exert influence on individuals and the cultural identity of a society. The life script of the deceased, as formulated for the funeral rites, plays a critical role in bridging the transitional stage between life and death. Cultures worldwide celebrate rituals in various ways, so for the purposes of this paper funeral rites are based on those traditionally found in Western cultures. Traditionally, some form of eulogy or story of the deceased is compiled and recounted. The identity of the person while living constitutes a continually evolving narrative, which reaches its conclusion at the time of death. Masterton, Hansson and Hoglund (2010) believe that according to narrative theory, a person's entire story can never be fully told because of the many threads that overlap and are interwoven with the narrative identity of others (p.345). The story of the deceased's life must be summarized to invoke his or her truest essence at the time of the death ritual in order to become incorporated into society in the context of the individual's new identity as ancestor.

Stories may be fabricated, incidents may be omitted or facts discovered after death can later be revealed, which could change the entire trajectory of the personal narrative of the deceased, and as a result, affect the narratives of those still alive. Masterton, Hansson and Hoglund (2010) argue, "Narrative identity emphasizes the fact that no person is alone in knowing or telling their life story. People's lives are entangled and parts of the life story of a deceased person can remain in the living realm. Since the narrative identity of a person does not necessarily end upon their death, and this narrative continues to relate directly to the person who once existed, it is the narrative subject that can continue to be posthumously wronged" (p. 340). These stories we tell about ourselves and that others tell about us overlap those of our close family, friends, neighbors and the society in which we live. If someone discloses new information at any point then all stories are affected and an individual and societal reevaluation of identity takes place.

When someone very dear to us dies we may feel that we have lost a piece of ourselves, a piece of our personal narrative identity. If someone we admire or esteem, such as a celebrity, dies, we may feel we have lost an important part of our cultural identity. When celebrities, such as Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson or Steve Jobs die, it is not a personal loss that most experience, but rather one of cultural identity loss. Their lives may or may not have touched us personally, but in death their narratives become a part of our own as well as the collective cultural narrative. After reading the eulogy of Steve Jobs, delivered by his sister, I felt I had seen a glimpse of the true man from the eyes of a loving sibling and my own interpretation of his life narrative was altered. Was the physical identity of who he was altered? No. It was his narrative identity which transcends death which was enhanced and embellished and could then be incorporated into the collective memory of the culture.

When thousands died on September 11, 2001, people around the country felt the loss personally, yet the majority had no personal connection to those who perished. The loss that was felt deeply was experienced as a wounding of the cultural identity. The stories, images and videos in the aftermath have continued to exert an influence on the collective memory of the American people as a cultural group. My personal trek crosscountry by car in the aftermath, led me to experience firsthand the sentiments of different communities uniting under their sense of national identity. Memorial services were taking place across the US in large cities and small towns with a majority of citizens sharing stories and memories of where they were when they heard the news or saw the news footage. These stories and images formed part of the collective memory of millions and an updating of personal narrative identity took place for all. Before memorial services could integrate a victim's Death Narrative into cultural memory, friends and family of victims had no way to assimilate or incorporate the new identity of their loved one who had perished.

Kastenbaum (2004) describes the grief of family members as a result of having no physical bodies to bury, “Both the victims and their families were in a kind of a limbo-actually, in a limbic zone between one identity and another (p. 7). Rites-of-passage theory (Gennep, 1960) conceives of life as a sequence of many smaller journeys within the larger tour of the total course of existence. The theory often emphasizes the vulnerability of people who have moved from their previous secure status but have not yet reached their next destination or haven.

Death of a loved one, whether anticipated or unexpected, is often traumatic. It has the ability to undermine the foundations of what we believe of our existence. We need funeral rites to help formulate a new stable base for our identity in both our personal and cultural narratives. Hayden (1997), a professor of archaeology, asserted that humans have been performing rituals for over 100,000 years, and argues that rituals serve an important survival function by helping to maintain important social bonds (p.81-82). Initial denial of death leads to acceptance during the funeral rites. Without acceptance, healing cannot begin. Castle and Phillips (2003) assert that funeral rituals facilitate healing in the initial stages through reminiscing about the deceased, sharing pleasant memories, getting acknowledgement of the importance of their loss and of the significance of the deceased in their life, and maintaining relationships with others especially those who have had similar grief experience (p.44). In addition to facilitating the grieving process, funeral rites and ceremonies serve the necessary function of incorporating the deceased’s narrative identity into their new role as ancestor. This new narrative is not confined to time or place and forms a new relationship with the living. It is this relationship that offers consolation and solace for the bereaved.

In order for incorporation and healing to begin it is important that the funeral ritual include an authentic interpretation of the life of the deceased. This does not happen when an inaccurate or false identity of perfection is presented, but rather when quirks, and negative traits are also incorporated into the death narrative. When asked how the Death Narrative of the deceased affects the community, Dorry Bless (2013), a Certified Life-Cycle Celebrant and Director of Alumni Relations at the Celebrant Institute, responded, “When that narrative is shared and the intent is such that the story is told honestly, lovingly, perhaps with humor, certainly including personal vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and even offering little-known facts or quirks along with the larger arc of the individual’s life, then the community as a result feels more connected to one another, to the family of the loved one, and to the human story, hero’s journey, or human path” (Bless, personal communication, 2013). It is this sense of connectedness and community that helps reaffirm our own identity in relationship to the deceased and the culture around us.

The funeral also unites our individual identities and communal identities in the symbols used throughout the ritual services. C.S. Davis (2008) explains how “funerals pull together the community and provide support by connecting the private experience of grief with the public performance of ritual” (p.417). Our personal identity when we lose someone close, someone integral to our own narrative, is questioned, evaluated and in some way is open for reconfiguration by both the community and ourselves. When we participate, as a group, in a funeral ritual, we share stories and help each other to integrate these narratives into our own personal narratives to facilitate grief recovery. More recent work on loss and bereavement has increasingly examined grief as a social phenomenon that occurs within an interpersonal context of friends, family and culture (Nadeau, 1998: Rosenblatt, 2001: Walther, 1996). The sharing of stories and viewing of symbols that are recognized function as important facilitators. They provide a means for the incorporation of the Death Narrative to the cultural identity as well as the personal identity of the bereaved. When ritualized incorrectly or inadequately, mourners are left with a greater sense of loss and an incomplete incorporation of the death narrative occurs as shown by the example below from an

anonymous (2012) mourner posting to Facebook:

“One of the things that really bothered me when my dad died 16 odd years ago was the lionization of the man. I loved my dad and wish like hell he was still here, but [he] was no saint. He was a rascal, a womanizer, a weirdo, a sonofagun, a loyal friend, a drinker and a vicious enemy. In other words, he was human. But at his funeral it was all glory and sainthood. That’s not respecting or honoring the dead: it’s revisionist history. Much better, I think, to celebrate the terrible and glorious reality of a wonderful flawed human being.”

According to narrative bereavement theorists, individuals turn to (co) recalling and sharing stories about the loved one and the loss in order to repair and stabilize their fragile sense of identity and to reaffirm their understanding of the roles and relationships within the family structure (Harvey, 2002; Neimeyer, 2001; Walter, 1996). Assmann & Czaplicka (1995) stated “[Through communicative] communication, each individual composes a memory which...is (a) socially mediated and (b) relates to a group. Every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others. These “others,” however, are not just any set of people, rather they are groups who conceive their unity and peculiarity through a common image of their past. Every individual belongs to numerous...groups and therefore entertains numerous collective self-images and memories “(p.127).

While attending a memorial service for a dear friend in 2008 I noted several differences to what I had come to expect as a funeral service. The differences were both obvious and subtle, however the overall ritual contained standard elements. Because the deceased had been brought up Jewish, practiced Wicca, studied Taoism but finally became a Buddhist, all of the aforementioned groups were represented and elements of each religion were presented in some way. The memorial was held in a Masonic Lodge dating back to the late 18th Century. The deceased’s husband was a member and she had been active in the restoration of the building so it had profound meaning for the family. The deceased’s collection of needlepoint, all of her own design and hand, were hung throughout the cozy and intimate rooms. A ceramic urn containing cremated remains was placed in a separate room on an altar containing personal items of the deceased, photos and Buddhist ritual items. Mourners were encouraged to light incense, the smoke rising to carry prayers suffused the room. Buddhist monks conducted group chants and prayers. In order to provide a smooth transition of her identity from living member of the community to ancestor, a time was set aside for sharing of stories. Sitting in radiating circles, each mourner spoke as they were moved to with no formal order or preparation. The stories shared were often humorous, sometimes poignant recollections of how the deceased had changed the individual’s life.

This opportunity to share memories reaffirmed each individual’s contribution to the Death Narrative of the deceased. Since many of the mourners shared only the deceased as a common connection, a greater sense of community was established with a new collective memory and group identity. While stories were being told a large video screen scrolled continuous images of the deceased’s life with as many of the attendees included as possible, further reinforcing the new group identity and the newly created collective memory. Masterton, Hansson and Hoglund (2010) asserted that “some of our most defining characteristics are concerned with our relationships to other people” (p.342). They further go on to say, “In recounting one’s life, it will become apparent that other narratives link with one’s own narrative and therefore the construction of personal identity cannot be carried out in isolation” (p.342). In successful funeral rites a person’s narrative will touch on and incorporate fragments of narrative from those still living as well as those who may have preceded the deceased.

Those mourners, who participate and attend funeral rites, do so not only to mourn the loss of the deceased and offer comfort for those who remain but also to reaffirm their own identity in relation to the group identity as a whole. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) believe that “Every individual belongs to numerous groups and therefore entertains numerous collective self-images and memories” (p.127). A person’s grief experience provides an opportunity for growth and change to their own life story. They may evaluate their ideas of self-worth, ponder their particular life narrative and make changes in the hope that they will be honored when their own death occurs. They may share stories and memories of times spent with the deceased, all of which become part of the larger funeral narrative and part of the collective memory of the group. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) discussed the theories of a collective or social memory as first independently conceived of by sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs and art historian Aby Warburg in the 1930’s. While both approached the concept in fundamentally different ways, they both concluded that collective memory was not a biologically inheritable condition but rather something fundamentally cultural (p.125). They further assert, that “through the practice of oral history we have gained a more precise insight into the peculiar qualities of this everyday form of collective memory” (p.127).

Funereal elements that help shape the collective memory from which cultural identity is formed are made up of more than the Death Narrative. Symbols, signs, music, poetry and language used are all designed to invoke key elements of the larger cultural identity of the participants. Inasmuch as the use of these additional elements of ritual can reinforce group identity, their omission can have the effect of diminishing or changing the group identity. Reimers (1999), after attending three different ethnic funerals in Sweden, concluded that the way funerals and grave markers are executed allows them to be employed as communicative symbolic actions for construction of ethnic and cultural identity. She further asserts, “Death rituals can be employed to enhance, subsume, or to fuse social boundaries” (p.147). In religious services, readings from religious texts, discussion of biblical stories, the traditional services, costumes, and pageantry all are designed to unite the group as a single collective. The mourners in attendance at the funeral rites become ‘other’ from those not in attendance.

In 2009 I attended the funeral of an elderly Polish immigrant in my hometown of Pine Island, New York. Polish immigrants founded this small agricultural community in the late 19th Century and descendants as well as evidence of the ethnic heritage of the region are still apparent. During the traditional Catholic service a large portion of the Mass was performed in Polish, thereby reinforcing the cultural identity of the majority of the mourners. Music and hymns were in both Polish and English in order to incorporate those not of Polish decent into the group. The larger cultural group represented were those of the Catholic faith who were united by the traditional service that followed standard format even when language was alternated. The ceremonial symbols, hymns, and format of the service all reinforce the traditions and continuity of the assembled group. If there were those of other affiliations present, for the time that they were participants they became part of the collective memory of the group.

Similarly, those in attendance at the wake or church services are differentiated from those who attend the internment or disbursement of the deceased’s remains. These smaller groups tend to be limited to immediate family and friends but they form minicultures of their own. More intimate stories and recollections may be shared and the identities of both the living and dead are simultaneously transformed. Baddeley and Singer (2010) stated, “All cultures have implicit cultural life scripts that define preferable or acceptable ways to be and act. The creation and (re) telling of family stories is a way of establishing a family identity that distinguishes the family from all other families and defines its most prized values, its outlook on the world, and its shared identity” (p.200) The sharing of rituals, symbols, signs, anecdotes and

stories all help to unite the bereaved, family, friends and associates into a collective culture formed around the central Death Narrative in funeral rites. The collective as well as individual narratives find incorporation of the new narrative identity of the deceased easier when all of the elements of good ritual are present and executed properly. Masterton, Hansson and Hoglund (2010) affirm, "The narrative of a person continues to represent that person's life, even if the person is no longer alive, and as such we have a duty to the deceased... Since personal identity is fragmented and is to be found in other people's narratives as well as one's own, no one can have complete access to their own narrative. New events may continue to be part of a person's narrative after their death, which means that the narrative identity is still open for revision after death" (p.343).

As an example of narrative revision after death I use the story of my grandfather. As a child my understanding of this man was limited to his annual visits from Germany which at some point always included unintelligible arguments between him and my father. Several years after his death I discovered that he was not my biological grandfather. I later understood him to have been a physically abusive alcoholic to both my father and grandmother. A decade later I learned that he had been castrated by the Nazis. All of these facts in addition to the stories garnered from those who knew him best, had the effect of posthumously altering his personal narrative as I understood it. These narratives also changed my personal narrative when the stories of my then still living grandfather were revealed. Baddeley and Singer (2010) believed "that the sharing of autobiographical memory narratives of loss and of the deceased person, especially within the family, is a major way to maintain and/or reconfigure a healthy sense of identity after a loss." (p.198) In contrast, they stated that "the withholding of socially sharing autobiographical memories about the loss and the departed family member – as a way to either conserve an existing narrative identity or assert a new narrative identity" (p.198). In the case of my grandfather, the attempt to shield me as a child was a way to maintain an apparently healthy family identity. When new information was revealed over the course of a decade, my personal and family narrative had to be altered to reflect the new facts.

If the narrative identity of a person while living constitutes a continually evolving narrative, that narrative should reach its conclusion at the time of physical death. If, however, the physical identity of a person is separate from narrative identity then the narrative identity, as a component of the larger cultural identity, becomes immortal as long as the culture survives. With the advent of social networks like Facebook and MySpace and a host of electronic memorial pages provided by funeral homes, the narrative identity can now live on far past the memories of a generation of descendants. Masterton, Hansson and Hoglund (2010) argued that the narrative is separate from the identity of the individual as it overlaps the narrative of other members of society and because there is no concrete narrative beginning to individual identity, there can be no definitive ending. (p.343). Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) stated that "The specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture is not seen to maintain itself for generations as a result of phylogenetic evolution, but rather as a result of socialization and customs" (p.125). The effects of the final narrative are visited upon the survivor and the society in which they live and contribute to the collective memory of the culture.

This paper is an analysis of identity and what happens to it after death. According to Narrative Theory personal identity is created through a series of stories, fragments assembled and edited by others and us. A person's life narrative exists independent of physical identity and as a result lives on after death while continuing to exert influence on individuals and the cultural identity of a society. I have shown the importance of the Death Narrative and how it facilitates the grieving process. The Death Narrative of the deceased, as formulated for the funeral rites, plays a critical role in bridging the transitional stage between

life and death. Narrative Theory implies that a person's entire story can never be fully told. Incorporating and sharing the memories and anecdotes of others, as well as using culturally recognizable symbols throughout the funeral rites creates new stories as well as reinterpretations of old ones. These transform the narrative of the deceased and shape new memories for individuals, thereby adding to the collective memory and cultural identity of the society. My research concludes that the story of the deceased's life must be summarized to invoke their truest essence at the time of the death ritual in order to become incorporated into society in the context of their new identity as an ancestor within the family and society as a whole.

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