

Long Buried, Death Goes Public Again

11/2/02

By FELICIA R. LEE

In the 1950's, that arbiter of morals and manners Emily Post wrote that more and more people believed that they should not go into mourning, to avoid casting "the shadow of their sadness."

These days, though, mourning has moved from a private and family matter to an increasingly public concern, with the widely televised memorial service for Senator Paul Wellstone, a national day of mourning for the victims of Sept. 11 and avid debates about the appropriate World Trade Center memorial.

"The old cliché is that we are a death-defying culture," said David J. Rothman, a professor of social medicine and of history at Columbia University, where he began teaching Columbia's first course on death in 1997. With the exception of wars, which invite memorials and searches for graves, the 20th century moved death into hospitals and away from daily life, he said. People abandoned public markers of grief like black armbands, regular graveside visits, wreaths on doors.

"As hospitals became the central institutions in health care, they simultaneously took over the care of the dying," said Professor Rothman, who in 1998 conducted a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar at Columbia on the history of death in America. "In the process, they rendered death almost invisible, secluding it from the community and indeed, even from relatives and friends of the dying."

But beginning with the AIDS epidemic, there was a seismic cultural shift in society's approach to death, Professor Rothman said. "We have begun putting names on statis-

tics — the Vietnam Memorial was an effort in that direction," he continued. "With 9/11, the press displayed the names and photographs of the dead in a way that made them public tombstones."

If collective tributes and public monuments have gained new attention over the last few years, so have the meaning and form of individual markers, memorials and graves.

Consider an exhibition that opened on Thursday at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Mass., "Grave Matters," a display of black-and-white photographs of the graves of 150 famous Western thinkers — from Sir Francis Bacon, who died in 1626 and rated a statue on the grounds of St. Michael's Church in St. Alban's, England, to Ralph Ellison, buried in 1994 at the Trinity Church Cemetery in New York. It will be followed by a panel next week on artistic representations of death and mourning.

Intended as an extended meditation on death, "Grave Matters" was actually conceived over four years ago by Mark C. Taylor, a Williams College professor of humanities who teaches philosophy and religion.

"The exhibition has become timely in a way no one expected," Professor Taylor said. "For the past year, as a society, we've been dealing with death and mourning. How does modernity deal with death? The world seems more fragile to many, though to me, the issues are broader than this particular historical moment."

There is the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who so often pondered death and the meaning of human authenticity, buried in 1976 at the Church of St. Martin in the village of Messkirch, Germany, full circle to where he had been born and baptized. There is Herman Melville, who wrote about the terror of the empty page, in the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx near his 18-year-old son Malcolm (a suicide), his 1891 granite headstone engraved with a quill and an empty scroll.

And there is Andy Warhol, so big in life, his modest, black marble stone engraved in 1987 with a pair of obediently clasped hands in the St. John the Baptist Cemetery in Bethel Park, Pa.

Among the other graves that are held up to the light are those of Jackson Pollock, Soren Kierkegaard, James Baldwin, Carl Jung, Samuel Beckett, Vincent Van Gogh, Charlie Chaplin, Frank Lloyd Wright, Sigmund Freud, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (together for eternity in Paris).

Professor Taylor said: "The materiality of death and the body is the flip side of cyberspace and virtual reality with which our lives are increasingly caught up. There are these dreams of living longer, of immortality through technology, whether genomes or downloading brains into computers. 'Grave Matters balances' this."

Seminars, books, college courses and projects on death and dying have sprung up to help Americans grapple with these new realities, as major foundations like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Open Society Institute have poured money into death-related topics over the past five years. In 1997, for example, the Johnson Foundation, Home Box

Office and the National Hospice Foundation even sponsored a seminar to help screenwriters and other artistic creators write more realistically about death.

Last year, a historical society in Missoula, Mont., presented "Stories and Stones," a tour of the local cemetery that included the history of the markers. Around the same time, local artists held a popular workshop to create memorials for deceased loved ones, said Ira Byock, a physician who is directing the Missoula Demonstration Project, which looks at end-of-life care and attitudes

about death. The tour will be repeated next month.

"We're growing up gradually as a culture," Dr. Byock said. "The baby-boomers are beginning to realize — dying happens."

For Professor Taylor, his own fascination with death began with his discovery in 1956, at age 11, that he had a sister who died at birth the year before he was born. He also had a brother, born two years after him, who had Down syndrome, who was too sick ever to come home and who died in 1954 at 7, weighing only 11 pounds.

An essay he wrote in a companion book, "Grave Matters" (Reaktion Books), examined the social hierarchies and religious beliefs in Europe and America that influenced how and where one was buried. For instance, it was common in Europe until the 12th century, Professor Taylor writes, for ordinary men and women to be buried in mass graves.

In the United States, the glimmers of modern, parklike cemeteries can be seen with the Rural Cemetery Movement, which began in Cambridge, Mass., in 1831. The movement, Professor Taylor writes, co-

incided with the rise of 19th-century Romanticism in America and Europe, with its emphasis on the importance of nature and of honoring the dead and making their lives instructive for the living.

The grave tales told in "Grave Matters" vary. Emily Dickinson is fittingly buried almost right in her backyard in Amherst, Mass., where she lived and worked all her life. The ever-morbid Edgar Allan Poe, who said that the worst thing was to be buried alive and that "the boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague," was initially buried in 1849 in Baltimore at a grave marked only with the number 80. The grave received its current large marble marker in 1875, at a memorial service that most dignitaries declined to attend.

Leonard Woolf scattered the ashes of his wife, Virginia Woolf (who drowned herself in 1941), under an elm tree in their garden in England and marked the place with a line from her novel "The Waves": "Against you I will fling myself unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!"

Professor Taylor, who has selected his own final resting place in the South Lawn Cemetery in Williamstown, Mass., said: "People don't talk about this, what they want done when they die. The unspeakable is not sex, it's death."