Finding Comfort in the Safety of Names

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

The capitalized words printed just above these, which you may have read or maybe your eye skipped over them, are my first and last names. In the cafeteria of the building where I work, a similar name — Jay M. Kimmelman — appears on a plaque commemorating New York Times employees killed during World War II. Jay M. Kimmelman worked in the department of outgoing mail. When I pass the plaque, I think of him. I feel a connection.

What is it about a name? Its power is palpable but mysterious. Without thinking, we say we know someone when we know his name. “Do you know who that is?” “Yes, that’s Jay from outgoing mail.” But how much do we know? We react to names that resemble ours, or resemble the names of people we know, in the same vague way that we scour other people’s family snapshots. We hunt for clues to what they tell us, often idly. We look for something of ourselves.

But names, like photographs, unless they are ours or those of our friends and family, say much less than we expect.

The competition guidelines for the memorial at ground zero require that the design “recognize each individual who was a victim” on Sept. 11, 2001, and on Feb. 26, 1993, when the World Trade Center was first attacked. It’s a safe bet that many of the 5,200 submissions interpret that as some kind of list of names. By aesthetic and social consensus, names are today a kind of reflexive memorial impulse, lists of names having come almost automatically to connot “memorial,” just as minimalism has come to be the presumptive sculptural style for memorial design, the monumental blank slate onto which the names can be inscribed.

During the past week the news broke that the remains of more than 1,000 of the 2,972 people who are missing from the Sept. 11 attack will be buried at the memorial. Investigators cannot identify more than 12,000 body parts — the DNA is too badly damaged — and so the remains will be dried and vacuum sealed, preserved, like ancient mummies, in white opaque pouches, in the hope that technologies of the future can decode who is who. The Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, in addition to requiring recognition of each victim, instructed entrants in the competition to include space for the remains, just in case.

So now the memorial becomes a literal cemetery, with the oldest form of human identification, names, most likely testifying to victims the newest science can’t distinguish. The ethos will be different from that of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. There are no bodies buried at the Vietnam memorial, nor any unaccounted-for remains. That memorial is a list of names, a neutral place to meditate abstractly on the war and on the dead and missing, who are elsewhere.

By the afternoon of Sept. 11, people were already buying photocopied files with the names and pictures of their dead or missing friends and relatives at makeshift shrines around the city: instant, homegrown demonstrations against the anonymity of mass killing. The flyers, which were at first missing-persons posters, quickly became private memorials, reminding everybody that the people who died at the World Trade Center were not numbers but someone’s husband or sister or son.

This isn’t new. The impulse to name names already became commonplace when World War I. Partly, it democratized war. Foot soldiers were recognized not as nameless pawns but as individuals, like the generals who sent them to die. The war had made many people cynical about everything except the doughboys in the trenches. These were the everyday heroes, if there were any heroes, instead of the military leaders or lone Paul Revere types who had traditionally been singled out for memorials. The listing of their names represented the distance between the recruit and the officer, but it also represented a tacit protest against the anonymity of modern warfare. Names both stood for the individual soldier and, correlatively, pleaded for a more humane approach to battle, which is to say they gained both literal and symbolic value.

World War I also inspired tombs of the unknown soldier. The tomb tried to reconcile two conflicting ideologies about war: the dehumanizing anonymity of death and the nobility of personal sacrifice. The unknown soldier symbolized both the masses of anonymous dead and each missing soldier, whose name we were implicitly meant to attach to the tomb.

To this morbid history, World War II contributed lists of innocent victims. Fifty years after its founding, Israel’s Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, which in Hebrew means “a monument and a name,” is still recovering the names of the Jews who died during the Holocaust, a vain and fruitful enterprise in that all the names will never be accounted for, so that the process of trying to remember cannot end.

By the time of Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial in 1982, the idea of names, engraved simply and identically — a visual equivalent to the monotone roll-call of the dead, which has also become a standard memorial ritual — achieved Platonic form, more moving for being so spare. Minimalism proxied itself there as the sculptural language of the memorial sublime, combining the abstraction of the memorial’s physical form with the absolute specificity of the names of every dead and missing soldier. It was the inverse of the tomb to the unknown soldier, which had become nearly obsolete, thanks to improved forensic science and record keeping, or so it seemed until Sept. 11.

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Ms. Lin’s memorial, which carefully took no side in the debate about Vietnam, was made out of polished black granite so that people would literally see themselves reflected in the names on the wall, a mirror of perception. The Vietnam War was an unrecoverable loss, but the dead and missing from that war could be listed. Names seemed morally neutral. They were a compromise in a society that could not decide where it stood. Today, it is too early to know the historical lessons of the attacks on the World Trade Towers, but the casualty list can be drawn up. A world that does not seem to agree about anything can settle on the names of the dead. Lists of names promise closure, a conflict-averse path to catharsis in an age of instant gratification and short attention spans.

But written words, as Shimon Attie, an artist of memorials, has said, are images, and images have an aesthetic component and a political one. A long list of names is, first of all, an incantatory sight, the length of the list implying the scale of the event memorialized. Seeing 57,000 names is not the same as seeing 168 (the number of people killed in the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City) or 2,792 or 6 million, by which point a list becomes almost unreadable. Numbers suggest the enormity of loss but are a dubious measure of history. Not many people died at Lexington and Concord but what happened there changed the fate of the nation.

And names only seem morally neutral. Ms. Lin’s Vietnam memorial made names the basic irreducible fact of this episode in history. Names were all that was left after the pomp and flourish of old-fashioned memorial design were stripped away. In hundreds of years, when the historical debates Ms. Lin studiously sidestepped may be forgotten, the names of the men will be what remain written in stone. Picture, for a second, that memorial without the names: a plain black tombstone, an open wondow on the Washington Mall, which was how Ms. Lin imagined the design sculpturally. The message about the war would be very different.

Names animate space. They are like ghosts. We read into them. The ethnic variety of names on the Vietnam memorial summons up an image of a diverse population, a model democracy, a political portrait that belies the rifts of the culture. One nation. One family.

The Vietnam memorial is also shaped like a book. Ms. Lin purposely chose a small, serif, unadorned, in monumental design, so that reading the names would seem more intimate, like scanning a printed page. The memorial is supposed to be our national story. She also listed the 57,000 names not alphabetically but chronologically according to when the soldiers died or went missing, an artistic device. Imagine all the John Smiths who died in Vietnam listed alphabetically. Now imagine that your father or son or brother or husband were one of them. Which John Smith on the wall would you touch or pin a photograph beside or leave flowers underneath?

The engraved style of these names, sans pomp and serif, is now standard. The names on the 168 chairs that, like headstones in rows, represent the dead in Oklahoma City as graphic descendents of the names on the Vietnam memorial. But names are fickle signifiers, containers for information that can be filled differently by different people, depending on what they know or think or hear about the person named. In Oklahoma City, some parents, unhappy with their sons-in-law, wanted their dead daughters’ maiden names on the memorial, not their daughters’ married names. Names are loaded. A list of the dead SS officers buried at Kolmshohe cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, would have a different effect on their relatives than on Jews.

We engrave the names of donors on walls of museums and other public buildings. Your money or your life. Lists democratize veterans in battle, but they are also signs of difference. At Oklahoma City a committee, like the one working to decide who qualified for a list of survivors. If you were injured and went to a hospital, you would be eligible; if you went to a dentist’s appointment before the explosion and stayed home sick that day, you were not a survivor, although of course you were. Just not in name.

Edward Lennthal, who wrote a book about the memorial in Oklahoma City, has described memorial hierarchies. Resolving them — who gets named and how — is, he argues, part of the process of setting history right, a service to the dead, the essence of what memorials are for. In Oklahoma City, there are the names of the dead on the chairs but also a museum, in which anyone can tell his or her story. Ground zero may consider something similar: the museum as egalitarian bulletin board, a repository of consolations to survivors, who can decide how they want to remember their dead. Families of the firefighters who died in the World Trade Center, for example, have pleaded publicly that their dead relatives be identified as firefighters in the memorial.

The families said the men lived and died as firefighters. Their ladder units were their other families. It isn’t that they were greater than human beings than the stockbrokers and restaurant workers who died, only that the dead men would want to be remembered as firefighters. They belonged to a community. Their names should be accompanied by F.D.N.Y., maybe even grouped separately. But then how does a list not rank the dead? The memorial at ground zero, with its unidentified remains, will be a special kind of memorial. It is partly a tomb of the unknown victim, with the abstract language of memorial design, if it ends up being abstract, that much more in tension with the literal: in this case not just literal lists of names but parts of bodies, the corporeal and the symbolic. Many people may think about these bodies when they stand there reading the names: about their own inability to connect the remains to names, about the insufficiency of names to conjure up and stand in for the people who are lost.

What’s in a name? Memorials are ultimately local, as the historian James Young has said. They are above all for the families and for a community, a committee, a group to grieve. There are many ways to enshrine and recall the dead. Memorials can be places of contention, which keep alive history through debate. Names, foreclosing political conflicts that may be the real unhealed wounds of the event memorialized, provide instead the possibility of solace for the relatives of the victims. Strangers show up and may be overwhelmed by the sight of long lists of people they did not know, with whom they can only try to identify, just as we all greet unfamiliar names, whose meanings remain elusive.

Finally, only the families and friends of the dead can really know what those names mean.