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Folklore and the Internet

Trevor J. Blank

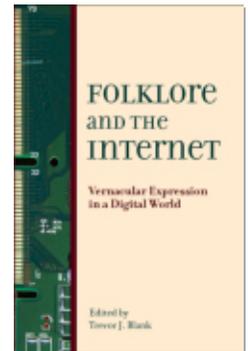
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Chapter 7

Ghosts in the Machine: Mourning the MySpace Dead

ROBERT DOBLER

Social networking websites like MySpace.com have exploded in popularity over the last few years.¹ Teenagers use the Internet to join online communities of peers who share virtually every aspect of personal experience in the public arena of cyberspace. MySpace in particular has become a major facet of modern American youth culture. Bill Tancer, corporate analyst for Hitwise.com, reports that MySpace achieved a 4,300 percent increase in visits over the last two years and a 132 percent increase over last year's figures (2006). In the span of a few years MySpace has become familiar to an entire generation of American youth as an indispensable means of experiencing and communicating with the world. The events of everyday life are documented on MySpace profiles, from schoolyard gossip to weekend plans; it has become a forum for daily interaction with peers.

Unsurprisingly, life-changing events in the lives of MySpace users also are represented on user profile pages. Marriages, births, graduations, military service, and relocations are all incorporated into their user pages and assimilated within the context of the Internet through pictures, blogs, and user comments. Death is similarly represented online, often in striking ways. MySpace users continuously update their pages to reflect changes as they occur. When a user dies, however, the site remains unchanged—except for the message board. The deceased's online network of MySpace "friends" (composed of real-world friends

and people met *through* MySpace) continue to leave comments on the message board of the dead user. These comments are generally personal expressions of grief and an attempt to mitigate the permanence of the loss by keeping up a direct correspondence with the departed. Communication with the dead via MySpace message boards functions within a matrix of intermingled contexts: social, spatial, and temporal. It involves a unique overlapping of several spheres of influence, including the public and the private, the progressive and the static, and varying patterns of grief and otherworldly belief.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact demographics of MySpace, a report by owner and Fox media mogul Rupert Murdoch announced the creation of the 100 millionth MySpace account on 9 August 2006 (Adest 2006). The site has experienced exponential growth since its launch a few years ago, and it has become a byword in any discussion of current youth culture (Tancer 2006). Teens use the site as a way to create and perpetuate individual identity as well as a means of staying in touch with one another outside of school. A typical MySpace page includes pictures of the user, links to blogs written by the user, links to the MySpace pages of the user's friends, and a comment board where friends can post messages to the user that are visible to all visitors at the site. Personal modifications can be added to this basic format, such as the creation of unique web backgrounds and a feature that allows the user to choose a song that will play whenever his or her page is viewed. The result is an online representation of one's self over which each user has complete control. And it is this very personal representation of self that gives a MySpace page increased importance when the user dies.

I have observed that bereaved friends often continue to comment upon a now-static MySpace page in the present tense on a wide variety of topics: from the sharing of memories, to updates on daily life, to asking for guidance and signs from the deceased. In conducting a survey of the types of comments left on the pages of dead MySpace users, I have found that several trends seem to arise from this mass of communications. In this chapter I will provide an overview of some of the scholarship relating to the memorialization process; give a description of the various trends found in the MySpace comments, with special attention to the contexts in which these trends should be viewed; and conclude with an analysis of this phenomenon as an important area of study in the field of folk, or vernacular, religion.

Roadside Memorials

Given the recent emergence of social networking sites like MySpace, there is a dearth of scholarly literature examining the role the Internet can play in the expression of grief. However, the scholarship on roadside memorials² can be very useful in building an approach to the topic. Holly Everett discusses these in relation to the history of American death rituals, from the early tradition of funereal preparation occurring wholly within a private home to the modern and much-discussed “denial of death” where the preparations are performed in seclusion by the third-party, objective mortuary industry. Everett emphasizes the uniqueness of the roadside memorial as occupying “a space in the *public* landscape, and imagination, in between the home and the often geographically removed modern cemetery” (2002, 82; emphasis in original). It is just this interstitial nature that imbues the roadside memorial with such an affective charge. Public memorialization makes the act of mourning accessible to anyone in the vicinity of the shrine, personalizing this act while still separating the mourner from the physical corpse. Anyone who is affected by the death is free to visit the memorial and experience grief in his or her own private manner.

In addition to allowing for individual grief, roadside memorials place great emphasis upon the individuality of the deceased, affirming personal identity in the face of the anonymity of adolescent highway mortality, which made up 36 percent of all teenage deaths in America in 2006 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2007). The sheer statistical prevalence of automobile deaths blurs the victim’s personality and relegates the tragedy to the realm of cautionary tales and newspaper obituaries. Robert James Smith makes this point, describing a site maintained by a man to honor two victims of a fatal accident far from their own homes as “an attempt to declare and maintain a public grief against the seeming anonymity and erasure of most highway deaths” (1999, 103–04). Such shrines also “reflect a deeper unease about modern mobility, transience, the fragility of life, even the difficulty of identifying those responsible for the tragedies” (105). The American highway is symbolic of the modern high-speed world of the information superhighway, in which attention is always pushed forward to focus on the next thing. In a more literal sense, the highway system is maintained in such a way that the physical evidence of an auto wreck vanishes within weeks of its occurrence, effectively erasing the tragedy. As a result, the bereaved become determined to create and maintain a physical reminder to set the deceased apart from the mass of highway deaths that occur each year.

Public and Private

There is a sense of spiritual mystery about the roadside death site, as though something of the essence of the deceased might linger in the area, imparting a hierophantic aura to the physicality of the monument. The accident site becomes a publicly accessible space for interaction with and contemplation of the dead. It is an active process in that it is common for personal items to be left at the site, such as the crosses—covered with writing, engravings, and pictures—that Everett documents in her study (2002, 87). The public nature of these memorials allows anyone to mourn; the rights of grieving are not restricted to immediate friends and family. There is a communal aspect here, one that is not so obvious at the more sober and austere cemetery plot where the physical body rests. George Monger sees this as “an act of remembrance and of solidarity, a symbolic coming together of the community in mourning” (1997, 114). MySpace grief similarly involves active participation in the grieving process, although it is questionable whether or not the mourners who leave messages on these sites should be viewed as comprising a “community” in the normal sense of the word.

The act of posting a comment on the message board of the deceased is essential to this online grieving process. Because MySpace is usually a public forum, the profile of a deceased member can be viewed by anyone at any time, but the simple act of anonymously visiting a page does not appear to be enough for many mourners. A more direct and perceptible engagement with the deceased becomes necessary. This can be seen in the hesitancy that many posters show in their messages, as well as in the feeling that they are somehow obligated to express their feelings in a public forum. The following, pulled from the message boards of deceased teens, reveal the posters’ struggle to understand tragic loss with emotional words to the departed. The first three are from the MySpace page of a young woman, Valerie, and clearly show that for some mourners, time was needed before they felt able to comment, an act that seems to signify the permanence of the loss:³

Valerie—I have not been able to bring myself to comment because I do not want to believe this is even true.

Valerie, Valerie, Valerie . . . this has taken me awhile to leave you a comment since you’ve been gone and I thought it was time that I really need to do this . . . I hope you will get this somehow, but I know that you can’t reply back to me.

It's been a week since you've been gone and I think I really need to do this . . .

In the next message, a poster questions the public nature of the MySpace page:

Jason, I have trouble understanding why I would write to you for everyone to see, when I know you understand anyway, but, damn, sometimes I'm just compelled to. I miss you bro.

Similar themes are found in these comments posted to the page of a young woman:

Hey Kate!!! I'm sorry I haven't left you a message yet but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I'm gonna try now but just thought of writing this to you knowing that you are gone makes me cry. It's not fair.

Hey baby girl just wanted to let you know that I am still thinkin of you and I visit your site all of the time it's just hard to always stay long enough to leave comments I love and miss you everyday.

For many mourners, posting a comment appears to be a step toward dealing with the loss. This seems similar to a loved one visiting and possibly speaking to a grave marker in the cemetery, only on MySpace, the act is done in a public sphere. Each comment will theoretically last as long as the site itself.

In an article in the *Miami Herald*, MySpace researcher Larry Rosen suggests that "when teens visit a crash site or grave marker they grieve alone. But at virtual memorials they meet an entire peer grieving community" (Bird 2006). Nonetheless, the existence of a "community" of grief online is debatable. Society's attitude toward the Internet seems to be that anything communicated online becomes public domain, independent of the scrambling legal networks that are constantly evolving around Internet usage. The much-publicized debates over the legality of music and movie piracy are evidence of this mindset. Anyone who expresses personal, private grief through a comment left on a MySpace message board knows that his or her message can potentially be viewed by anyone who wishes to look. The similarities in the types of comments left on the same pages show a congruity in grief, but I have found very little evidence of any of the bereaved acknowledging the sorrow of any other message-poster. Instead, the posters commonly express feelings of loneliness and abandonment in the absence of the departed, giving the impression that MySpace mourners grieve alone, together. Nothing can be inferred about the coping mechanisms in place outside of the cyber-world, of course, but in terms of virtual memorialization, the community

of mourners seems to be united in their isolation. For instance, these comments left by three different female posters on the MySpace page of a fifteen-year-old girl who died in a car crash indicate intense feelings of forlornness and isolation in their experiences of grief:

lisa i really need you right now things are going wrong . . . my life is so turned around and i am lost. i dont know what to do anymore.

im beginning to hate life, once again . . . i know that i shouldnt, but what do you do when you feel like theres no one around to be there for you or even wonder whats wrong . . . i just want to leave, and be with you . . . it seems that you are the only person that i could rely on to love me and care about me.

I miss you sooo much and I think about you everyday. I can't wait to be with you and see you again. I don't know if you know or not . . . but you were really the **only** person I could tell everything to. I could trust you . . . like no other person. I'm not afraid to die anymore, 'cuz I know . . . that when I do end this life here . . . I'll be with you. And I don't want to sound crazy, but that would make me soo happy . . . to be able to spend time with you again. But I'll write more sometime else . . . sometime soon. I love you! and I miss you terribly. I'll talk to you later. <3

It is possible that these messages function as cries for help, given the public nature of MySpace, but it also seems quite likely that there is a high level of teenage solipsism occurring in these comments. It is hard, if not impossible, to determine to what extent these declarations of grief are public posturing and to what extent they are genuine, personal expressions of deep feeling.

As discussed above, a main feature of MySpace is the creation of individual identities, or *profiles*, which serve as thoroughly constructed personae to represent the essence of a personality. Every MySpace interaction, then, is carried out along the lines of these public-oriented expressions of the private. Because all MySpace identities are specifically manufactured, and since their representations of self may differ from the reality of that self, the only means of truly sincere expression must focus on the individual's *voice*, that is, on the text of a person's comments and messages. The amount of posturing involved in the construction of these identities makes it difficult to gauge sincerity, though the undeniable presence of casual conversation, fraught with jarring slang and mistaken grammar, grants a much clearer picture of a true personality reaching out from the manufactured profiles. The ideas conveyed in these impromptu comments are often so heartbreakingly direct and

unselfconsciously fumbling that it leads me to believe that the expressions of grief communicated on these message boards are quite genuine. In most cases the posters seem to intend them to be very personal, private transmissions to the deceased, although it must be stressed that the public component is so thoroughly pervasive in Internet culture that the extent of its influence on communication, whether conscious or not, is impossible to delineate. As Montana Miller emphasizes in her work on the subject of web memorials, one never knows exactly which “frame” these teens are working in, and to further confuse the issue, the teens themselves do not know. “How are the performances keyed? The senses and sensibilities we used to use to gauge this no longer apply. It’s like trying to apply the rules and ethics of friendship to your 387 MySpace ‘friends’” (2007).

In some instances it seems that the public aspect becomes more important to the griever than the private one. This may be the case in the frequent postings by people who claim to have not really known the deceased well but are nonetheless struck by the loss. A feeling of being part of a group becomes especially important to these posters, both in the sense that they experienced the loss of the deceased on a community level—sudden death confronts the poster with the fact of his own fragile mortality—and in the sense that the act of expressing sorrow on a public page joins them to the supposed community of grievers. In this band of isolated mourners, the bereft acquaintance can easily enter the online grieving process, avoiding the awkwardness of interacting with the close friends and immediate family of the deceased, to whom this grief is socially supposed to belong. As could be expected, this seems especially prevalent in cases of particularly random deaths, such as that of a Wal-Mart employee who was killed in the parking lot by a stranger who began indiscriminately firing a gun. With car accidents and suicides, there is often some notion of personal responsibility—maybe the victim was driving too fast or going somewhere he should not have been—but in cases of random violence, the pure unpredictability of death is shocking:

R.I.P. Billy! u will be missed buddy . . . Didnt no u that well but everytime we chilled or talked it was always something funny . . . u cracked me up . . . You are a caring person n dont no why such a thing would happen to u.

This world is quite a scary place to live in at times.

Even though i never met him he is part of my family, the walmart family, i along with him both work there, i a cashier and he a cart boy.

Billy,

Though we only hung out once this tragedy has really impacted me.
Why someone could do that to someone innocent is sick.

These posters can be seen struggling to understand violence in the world. They are expressing confusion and fear at the simple abruptness death can impose on anyone's life at any time. Although "Billy" was a peripheral character, or even a stranger, in their lives, the unpredictability of his death could just as easily happen to any one of the posters or to their own loved ones.

The idea of a supporting community of grief is often very apparent in the studies of roadside memorials. Everett (2002) writes of a memorial as a "gathering place" for friends of the deceased, and reports "groups of teens" congregating at a site to mourn. The parents of the deceased often end up taking an active role in the creation and maintenance of a memorial out of concern for the emotional health of the deceased's friends. While there is some direct evidence of parents communicating with friends of the deceased through MySpace, there is perhaps greater evidence that this is often not the case. Every profile lists the most recent login date for each user. Many accounts have not been accessed since the day of death, suggesting that there is no adult participation in the mourning process of the bereft adolescents.

Motion and Stasis

Roadside memorials have an existential resonance, in that they mark the point of departure from life into death, which is vitally important to the grieving friends of the deceased. The memorial, often a cross at the side of the road, can function as a physical representation of this transition. Visitors are confronted with the fact of a deep and long-lasting change; they come to the site because they feel that something of the deceased's spirit remains, but the irrevocability of the loss is symbolized in the cross, the traditional Christian representation of life transforming into death. Contemplating death's permanence, coupled with a belief in the persistence of the soul, can help in dealing with grief. A woman interviewed by Everett describes this occurrence at a memorial site for her daughter: "[Tara's] friends tell me all the time that when they're feeling down or they've got a problem or whatever that they'll go up there and sit at the cross. And then they'll feel better when they leave. So I feel like to them it's, it's a place to go, someplace that they feel like Tara's still there, you know, and I, it's hard to explain" (2002, 93).

There is a sense of progression, or at least of motion: a life was lived, and then it underwent a drastic and visible change into the form of a departed soul. This movement may be what lies behind the affectivity of a memorial over the actual gravesite. Everett quotes another woman who has lost a son: "Even though I go to the cemetery, I don't, it didn't seem like that was where I was drawn because he's not really at the cemetery. For some reason or another this location is where he was, so I would go there and so I wanted to put a cross there because that was where I went the most. And so I guess the symbolism is that that's kind of where I felt his spirit was last" (2002, 96). The mourners experience a feeling of the momentum of a life force that hangs about an accident site.

MySpace memorials lack this sense of movement for the most part, an aspect that is all the more striking in the context of the Internet, which is characterized by constant motion and fleeting temporality. Many MySpace users check their accounts at least once a day, visiting the profiles of their friends to see the latest posted pictures, comments, blogs, and music. If a profile does not experience steady change, it becomes increasingly less likely to be visited. The page of a dead MySpace user necessarily remains static. Comments accrue, especially on birthdays, holidays, and the anniversary of that individual's death, but the personal aspects of the deceased's constructed online identity are unaltered. The pictures stay the same, no blogs are added, and often the last login date remains painfully close to the date of death. The song picked to play for the visitor never changes, even though it has often significantly outlived its pop-chart expiration date. In an arena so dependent on fluid and constant motion, these sites possess an eerie stillness. On the surface this stasis seems to be appropriate for the funerary atmosphere of the message board; however, any representation of physical change—like the life-to-death progression of the roadside cross or even the solid finality of a granite slab—is wholly absent. The teens who visit a dead friend's site sometimes seem unnerved by this lack. They express distress at the tension between the invariability of the deceased's profile and the continuance of their own lives, now marred by the pain of loss. The following quotes, taken from several different message boards, all reflect the emotional turmoil of confronting the unchanging song choices and photos of their lost friends on the latter's MySpace pages:

This song makes me really sad . . .

I think cuz I listened too them ALL THE TIME in 8th/9th grade when we hung out so much . . . i hate how memories hurt so bad . . .
i love you.

Its so hard for me to come on here and see this.

damn girl i miss u sO much! when i lOok at ur pics. i think abOut ur smile, ur laigh . . . just everything n i miss it sO much! sO much has changed cOurt! so much! n it hurts.

fuck man im missin you! i look at your page still everyday n can't believe ur not around ne more. love ya man stay up n keep on ballin man! :(

Everytime I look at this page, and your last login, it's almost as if I expect something to change, but it never does . . . a tear will always shed in my eye.

One result of this conflict between motion and stasis is the mourners' increasing desire for the deceased's page to be permanent. A great deal of this feeling is probably an extension of the same yearning shown by erecting roadside memorials—to protect the memory of the deceased from the anonymity of teenage death. Because there is no physical, real-world “space” involved in a MySpace page, the apparent possibility of forever losing traces of the deceased is intensified. Since its inception, MySpace has been plagued with persistent rumors that it will either be taken down or start charging members to maintain accounts. The increasing frequency of spamming, phishing, and other chronic e-mail and Internet hazards throughout the MySpace community may also be weakening users' general trust in the site. Many comments emphatically promise the deceased that they will not be forgotten, using all caps and bold type to stress phrases like “never forget” and “always remember,” but there are also frequent examples of this fear of “losing” the deceased in specific relation to a MySpace profile:

does the pain ever go away angie? like a part of me wants it to bc im tired of hurting all the time, but another part doesnt want it to go away bc in a sence thats me forgetting a part of you and not remembering what happened and how much i fuckin love you! i really just hope you know how much i love you angie . . . and thats one thing that'll never die . . . i miss you and love you with all my heart!

i hate how your MySpace is deteriorating :/

Who ever is running Billy's profile now . . . plz NEVER delete it.

The idea that time erodes all traces of the departed seems to be especially poignant to MySpace grievers. There is evidence that many of these

MySpace dead have active roadside memorials and gravesites in addition to their online profiles, but the motionlessness of the profile, in its static depiction of the deceased at the time of his or her death, seems to possess more immediacy. Even more than a depiction, it represents an act of *creation* by the deceased, who put something of himself into the construction of his online identity. While the palpable memorial sites manifest the physical loss of the person, a MySpace profile holds the memory of the deceased frozen in time and thus unchanged in the minds of mourners. The transformative aspect of death is removed, and the deceased effectively becomes a “ghost” in a space that is not tangible and a time that is arrested. This is not necessarily a hindrance to the healthy overcoming of grief by the bereft, but it is something I believe to be unique to the medium of the Internet. The passing of time in the “real” world affects MySpace mourners, who are sometimes distressed, as above, and sometimes take a kind of comfort in the stability of the profile, though mindful of the sense that it, too, could vanish. For some users, the act of checking the deceased’s MySpace page and commenting on it becomes ritualistic. There is often a sense of disbelief in the amount of time that has passed as well as the idea that the deceased can be held on to in some manner through continued activity on his or her MySpace profile:

every time i come in here, i always want to tell you the same thing.
and that is, i love you. but i want to say something more than that
this time.
something like i think about you all the time and how i love to see
your face everyday even though they’re just pictures.
i still love you tons and i miss you very very much.

It sucks that its been 7 months today. Time has just been flying and I
dont want it to. I wish it was like May 3rd when i was talking to u in
class before i left for my game.

heey tyler i was lookin at ur page like everytime im on here lol i cant
believe its been almost a year. it seems like it was jus yesterday but
then again it seems like 4ever its weird :) but i miss u just the same
especially now that its summer. i keep thinkin about last year and
how at this time we were havin so much fun* everyone Loves u &
misses you down here *xoxo*

There is evidence that as time increases the distance between the mourners and the dead, the posters worry that the deceased will lose importance in their lives. These individuals express the fear that if they overcome their grief and “go on with their lives,” the dead friend will cease to

exist altogether, and not just be lost in the physical, mortal sense. There is a belief that the passage of time lessens the importance of past friendships and events, and we can plainly see attempts on these MySpace pages at safeguarding memory against the steady sweep of time. The widening gap between the period when the deceased was alive and the mourner's present timeframe is especially visible on a MySpace profile, where the unchanging personality of the dead exists seemingly forever.

Grief Patterns

Certain trends emerge in the comments left on the pages of dead MySpace users. Some griever exhibit a more intuitive, feeling-based connection to the spirit of the departed, while other mourners tend to focus on past memories and what they imagine the deceased might be up to in heaven. Some posters write of "sensing" the presence of the deceased and a certainty in the knowledge that the deceased is actively watching over them and participating in their lives. Others seem to focus on the continuation of past activities into the afterlife, often instructing their deceased friends to get the party in heaven ready for their own eventual arrivals. They experience the immediate presence of the dead much less frequently than do the intuitive grievers.

The patterns emerging on the MySpace message boards fit the descriptions of mourning trends discussed by Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka (2000), who write of *intuitive* and *instrumental* patterns of grieving that the authors stress are related to, but certainly not determined by, gender. The intuitive style is characterized by an intense, feeling-based, affective experience and generally occurs more often in female mourners, while males are more likely to be instrumental grievers, mourning on a more physical, cognitive level. Intuitive grievers find solace in an outward expression of anguish and in sharing their feelings with other mourners, while instrumental grievers are less affected on a gut level, transferring their energy into action, often in the form of physical or written dedications to the deceased. Again, the authors are careful to assert that both intuitive and instrumental patterns of grief are found among mourners of both sexes, and that the prevalence of the intuitive form among women and the instrumental one among men is almost certainly the result of the socialization of gender roles. The examples used in this chapter tend to fall along these gender lines, with female and male mourners often respectively exhibiting aspects of the intuitive and instrumental styles of grief; however, more data would need to be collected before this observation could be discussed conclusively.

These findings echo those of Gillian Bennett in her study of supernatural beliefs among women. She describes the commonality of the belief in the “good dead” among women, referring to spirits that are helpful and protective: “As they describe it, they are made aware of the souls of the good dead more often through sensing their presence than by seeing them in physical form” (1988, 30). Belief in the good dead reinforces the traditionally “feminine” intuitive notion that the world is an inherently benevolent and deeply meaningful place. “A traditional belief is accepted most readily if it depends upon the utilization of intuition, imagination, insight; if it is an involuntary experience rather than a chosen activity; if it enhances or extends personal relationships; and if it gives reassurance of the goodness of God and man” (31). Many female MySpace mourners comment very directly, thanking the deceased for protection that they seem certain has been provided:

i got my license 2 days ago . . . i wore your necklace for good luck . . . a butterfly landed rite next to me and stayed there for like 5 mins before i went in the car . . . hmmm maybe it was you :) i miss you like crazyyy keep me safe while im driving. i love you and miss you so much
918 forevrr

Kelly . . .

You've been so heavy on heart the last few days. When I get into my car accident a few weeks ago, I know you were there to protect me, bcuz my accident coulda been way worse than what it was, and I think you were watching over me, not letting the air bags go off, bcuz everyone is shocked they didnt go off . . . but its a good thing they didnt bcuz I woulda got really hurt just from the air bags . . . Thank You for being my angel and always watching over me and everyone down here . . . I love you and miss you sooo much, I think of you everyday, every song on the radio makes me think of you, and I know you enjoy my kisses I blow you everyday when I drive by! I love you girl!

♥Nicole

Hey Pete! Well I just wanted to thank you for being my angel today and making sure that my accident didn't end up much worse . . . I know you were there and everyone told me I was very lucky I didn't flip, and that I walked away unharmed . . . They all said that I must have had an angel looking out for me . . . And I knew it was you . . . I love you Pete!

Interestingly, these young women assume that because the deceased died in car accidents, the realm of automobile safety somehow falls under their personal jurisdiction, similar to the functions of Catholic saints.

Many intuitive grievors also express thanks to the deceased for the manifestation of certain "signs" to communicate their continued presence in the lives of the posters. This can range from the abovementioned appearance of a butterfly, to the playing of a certain song on the radio, or even significant formations in the clouds:

The other day, you randomly came into my mind right when I felt alone . . . and then, for some reason, I turned around and immediately looked out the window and there was a sunstreaked sky just about to begin one of the most beautiful sunsets I've ever seen . . . it brought tears to my eyes. It was as if you took my chin and turned my head to show me that you are still with me and to show me how beautiful life can really be when put into it's simplest forms.

I love you sweetheart and think about you EVERYDAY! Yesterday I saw that rainbow :) U knew exactly what I needed . . . Thank you!

There is even some evidence that the public nature of MySpace may influence how the living experience otherworldly communications. On the message board of a young girl who died in a car accident, many of her friends write of the same types of signs from the deceased. The quantity of these experiences on this one page may indicate that the mourners are taking cues from one another. Numerous examples are given by different posters of the popular Shakira song, "Hips Don't Lie," being used by the deceased to offer reassurance; and various phenomena in the sky are reported, including one girl who posted a photograph of a cloud formation roughly in the shape of the numeral 3, the uniform number of the deceased:

hips dont lie has come on the radio like twice everyday when i'm listening to it . . . and right away i'm like yup, vals with us! i know it =) i love youuuu soooooo much girl. i'll keep praying and i can't wait to see you again! ♥

I was at rehab today and while I was doing my excercises doesn't hips don't lie come on. I had a big smile on my face because I knew you were telling me you were there with me. I miss you so much! I can't wait to see you again someday!

Everytime I'm stressin over school or upset, your song comes on Val.

And I know it you, telling me to smile, and that I'll get through it.
Miss you. Love you.

Ashley and I went to Subway to eat today and as soon as we sat down doesnt hips dont lie come on . . . we both looked at each other and said thanks val for letting us know your with us . . . you just love to do that to us . . . i miss you soo much . . . love you hun cant wait to see u again!!!

the other day at field hockey it was soo shitty out and as soon as michelle scored it got soo sunny out and we know it was you letting haley know you were proud . . . me and ruth just looked at eachother and we were like ahh VALERIE. and today for the first home game everyone kept finding 4 leaf clovers . . . we know youre always with us girl.

we lost to palmerton tonight.
how depressing is that.
i know you were watching.
@ the beginning of the game. i kept starring @ the clouds around the moon . . .

then the letters L. A. V. appeared . . .
VAL . . . then a big heart formed around the moon.
that brought the biggest smile to my face . . . and i started to get teary eyed.

I love you val . . . and i know your looking over all of us. I saw another number 3 in the sky when me and my friends were going out last week!! Love you girl. [left several weeks after the user posted a photograph of a cloud formation to the site]

It is common for intuitive grievors to use the MySpace message boards to confirm to the deceased that they are receiving their communications from the afterlife. Due to the life-altering nature of the loss of a close friend, naturally many teens find themselves dreaming frequently of the dead person. They often seem to recognize this as a product of stress and grief, but sometimes it becomes apparent that these posters are interpreting the dreams as the deceased's attempts to make contact. As a result, comments spring up assuring the dead friend that the attempt has been acknowledged and should be repeated. The subconscious nature of dreams, however, leaves these posters frustrated by their inability to control the situation or say the things they wish. MySpace message boards give them this control, but it is only a one-sided conversation with the dead:

hi Leah . . . i know we talked and u gave me a hug good bye the other day in my dream.. i know it was real because even in my dream i was crying to you telling u that u were gone n beggin u not to leave me, but wen i turned to look at u again u were gone!

Baby girl, I'm trying, I had a dream of you the other night, thanks, You know I need the visit!!! I Love You BH FOREVER & EVER

Call me again please !!! My dreams feel more real every time I have them. I long to have them, that at times all I want to do is sleep all day just to get close to you. I need you so bad right now. I want to hear your voice and see new pics of you.

hey ant-man i love you so much i had a dream like a while ago that you came down from heaven and all i said was i love you and good bye then you went into the sky and i woke up crying i hope you have seen courtney in her dreams like i asked you to well i love you soo much!

Posters' comments on the MySpace pages of the dead that relate experiences of otherworldly contact mostly fall under the rubric of the intuitive style of grief. These individuals *feel* the dead as a continued presence in their lives and often readily interpret daily events and dreams as communications from the beyond. There may even be something in the general communicative nature of MySpace that readily lends itself to these intuitive experiences.

Trends in the comments left by instrumental grieverers are generally more oriented toward the past and the future, focusing on old memories and looking forward to continuing the friendship in the afterlife. These posters seem to view life and death as distinctly separate spheres, with much less evidence of spirits actively interacting with the living, although both they and intuitive grieverers share the belief that the dead are able to read the messages they are posting. The posts usually emphasize past memories and future reunions, with the present mentioned only in the form of creative dedications. The following are examples of future reunion posts:

so im thinkin a keg . . . a few kegs lots of food, im talkin like all the snacks man. cookies chips dip crackers (not like the kind we are) an island to party on (im sure theres a good one big enough to fit us all on up there) fire wood guitars and the sax fa sho. i dont know how long you have but it better be there when we get there brother because its gonna be the biggest party youve ever seen!!!!!! love ya bro

wutup my nigga, me dave n jimmy bout to visit u n smoke a blunt
with u
jus like old times

Hey bro i think about you all the time and everytime i do it brings
a tear to my eye how something so horrbile happened to some1 so
nice. i Miss you cant wait to see you once again but we all know you
are living it up where you are now. see ya when i get there.

made some pumpkin pies like we did last year . . .
make jesus one . . . tell him Shawn Carter taught me that bomb ass
recipe . . . =)

And here are some creative dedications:

ill smoke my next blunt to you =/

r.i.p. i'll lay down a sweet ass happy hardcore set for ya at the next
party at the end of the month

happy birthday angela i still miss u so much u'll neva kno we haven
a party 2nite jus 4 u gurl

Instrumental expressions of grief on MySpace pages mostly fit this pattern of viewing death as final and divisive. For these mourners, communication with the dead appears to be a one-sided endeavor; the deceased can hear them but cannot interact with them. Since this concept effectively removes the dead from the present realm of existence, the comments of instrumental grieverers more frequently focus on the continuation of earthly activities "in the name of" the deceased, with the idea that the dead appreciate this in the afterlife and even anticipate a future reunion. These messages display a more cognitive approach to grief, in that the mourners seem to accept that the loss is permanent and begin to reshape their existence around it, dedicating their lives, songs, and drugs to the deceased without the intensity of feeling exhibited by intuitive mourners.

MySpace Mourning as Folk Religion

Communication with the dead via MySpace message boards recontextualizes the grieving process for the cyberoriented generation of American youth. This virtual arena for the experiences of death and grief exists at the intersection of the public and private lives of teenagers. On an existential level, much of the emotional charge of dead users' profiles

arises from the dynamic contradictions of motion and stasis in Internet space-time. Active engagement and communication with the deceased can be described in terms of patterns of mourning. What emerges is a complex and multilayered depiction of teenage grief adapted to and influenced by the cyber medium.

Functionally, the phenomenon of MySpace mourning reclaims death from the clinical hands of highway statistics and the funerary industry, making it accessible on a very intimate level. Every poster to a MySpace profile is free to express grief in whatever way he or she feels best pertains to his or her personal experience of that death. Specific trends in MySpace comments indicate the possibility of a public-sphere influence on the poster (as may be the case when multiple posters relate nearly identical experiences of signs from the deceased), but the *sense* of allowing personal approaches to grief is still present. The casual, conversational tone of many of the messages abounds with individuals fumbling toward coming to terms with loss.

Folk religion, based on Don Yoder's definition (1974), is often conceived of as a set of beliefs existing apart from and alongside of "official" religious beliefs and practices. Leonard Primiano (1995) responded to this concept by placing more emphasis on the individual, personal aspect of religious belief. The act of commenting upon the profile of a dead MySpace user brings many of the folk-religious aspects of the creation and maintenance of roadside memorials into the digital age. Both phenomena can be viewed as a folk reaction to the objectivity of the modern American death industry. They personalize death, keeping the individual characteristics of the deceased alive and preserved in a space separate from memory and photographs. Any person who wishes to participate in the grieving process—including communication with the dead—may do so, whether it be talking to a cross at an accident site or via the medium of a MySpace message board. They are both unique approaches to mourning that offer alternatives to the traditional funerals and cemetery rituals that seem cold and impersonal by comparison.

The psychological aspects of Internet grieving, as compared to roadside memorialization, remain to be seen, but they could prove to function differently, since MySpace profiles lack motion, contrary to the transformative symbolism of roadside shrines. The oldest profiles of dead MySpace users are no more than a few years old, and they already possess a haunting stillness. A few of the sites, just a year after the user's death, have already experienced a dramatic decrease in the frequency of posted messages. Except for a few who post with regularity, many mourners post only on birthdays, anniversaries of death, and holidays.

And, of course, the deceased remains unaffected by time and space, frozen at the age of death for as long as the MySpace phenomenon maintains its popularity.

Only time will tell what effects the transition of grief into the digital world will have on the memorialization process. The ubiquitous presence of the Internet in today's society is still an emergent phenomenon in many ways, with new advances and trends appearing almost daily. The current popularity of MySpace and the movement of everyday life into the sphere of cyberspace effect youth interactions in a complex variety of ways. As traditions of grief are adapted to the new virtual world, many exciting vistas for folkloric study are opening up for the observant, and the rapidity of change makes the continued documentation of digital influences all the more important in understanding modern culture.

Notes

1. Versions of this chapter were presented at the 2007 meeting of the Western States Folklore Society and the 2007 meeting of the American Folklore Society, where it was awarded the Don Yoder Prize for the Best Student Paper in Folk Belief or Religious Folklife.
2. This chapter owes much to the work of Everett (2002), Santino (2006), and Miller (2007), as well as to the encouragement of Dr. Daniel Wojcik at the University of Oregon.
3. All names of MySpace users have been changed to protect the users' privacy. I have replicated the spelling and grammar of all comments in their original public syntax.