

Hog Heaven: Funeral and Mourning Rituals of an Independent Motorcycle Club

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Introduction

How we grieve and mourn is influenced not only by our dominant culture, but also by our membership in subcultural groups. This exploratory study considers how being a member of a motorcycling subculture manifests itself in the rituals associated with loss. Members of independent motorcycle clubs were asked directly about the rituals they feel important to themselves and the families of loved ones. The results show that the love of a common social subculture—motorcycling—has led club members to develop a distinctive philosophy on the meaning of life and death. Members of the motorcycle clubs articulated a shared set of mourning rituals they believe essential to themselves, their club members and the families of lost friends.

Community, Ritual, and Death

In most postindustrial societies, there exists a dominant culture and a great variety of subcultures. Culture can be defined as a set of rules and standards reflecting the inherent values, beliefs and perceptions shared by members of a common society. Subcultures exist within larger societies and have a subset of specific values and beliefs that are shared within the subculture but not necessarily within the dominant culture. Different religious beliefs, for example, define distinct and separate subcultures of most societies. Subcultures are cultures within a culture, and can be defined by more than religion alone; other determinants of subcultures may include geography, political ideology, sexual orientation, recreational activities or ethnicity. Motorcyclists and the motorcycling lifestyle is a well-recognized American subculture (Maxwell, 1998). In addition, we may also find countercultures or contracultures within large societies (Yinger, 1960). Countercultures are subcultures that oppose the popular beliefs and behaviors of the dominant and most widely recognized and accepted subcultures. “Outlaw” or “one-percenter” motorcycle gangs represent one such counterculture.

According to Ross (1981), cultural biases “are fostered through cultural stereotypes . . . reducing all people of a given culture to one mold and . . . disregarding the uniqueness and variability of individuals within that culture” (p. 5). By contrast, even in subcultures, such as a motorcycle club, members may share common core beliefs but personal experiences and values continue to shape individual choices.

“Ritual is a specific behavior or activity which gives symbolic expression to certain feelings and thoughts of the actor(s), individually or in a group” (Rando, 1985, p. 236). Ritualized behaviors are among the most conservative and resistant to change, and rituals help us relate to a specific life experience and find meaning in it. The motorcycling lifestyle includes a variety of structured rituals that help preserve a sense of community and identity for the tribe: “The rituals, artifacts, and norms of the tribe are well-known and serve to distinguish the true members from the outsiders, while providing comfort and identity to those on the inside” (Austin, 2009, p. 71).

Rituals associated with death and dying are among the most enduring (Pine, 1969). The discovery of flowers and pine boughs in a 60,000-year-old Neanderthal burial site indicates that humans have been thinking about death for a long time (Sullivan, 1968). Death, being the end of all human life, aroused a need for us to examine and explore the meaning of human existence from its beginnings to its end. Throughout human history, most societies have developed formal rituals for mourning the deceased (Gorer, 1965). Such rituals assist in making sense of death. “Rituals become familiar because of repetition, providing a sense of supportive stability in times of personal or social disorientation, and funeral rituals are a means of acting out symbolic behavior that carries meanings difficult to communicate only in words” (Irion, 1990-91, pp. 16-61).

The meaning of death and how it is “addressed, recognized, acknowledged, and celebrated in each culture is varied” (Kagawa-Singer, 1998). Religious and cultural rituals associated with death provide a common vehicle for mourning that help members of the group through the grieving process and provide a community of support for the bereaved. In a time of discomfort and possible chaos, these rituals provide a sense of normalcy and predictability, as well as a mechanism to assist the grieving process and help the bereaved transition into a new phase of life. Grief both tears us apart and binds us together, and the role of culture in the expression of grief is well known (Cowles, 1996). Grief is dynamic, pervasive and highly individualized. All people experience grief over the loss of a loved one, and the process of mourning is considered to be the socially or culturally defined behavioral display of grief. Every culture has its own worldview consisting of the beliefs, values, behaviors, traditions, and rituals that are shared by the members of the group. According to Ross (1981), culture shapes or patterns the grief experience, and “as an affective response to loss or death, the experience of grief is probably universal, but its expression is strongly influenced by cultural factors” (p. 11). In societies where people share a common religion, religious rituals directly and indirectly influence the philosophical and spiritual beliefs about the significance of life and death from a particular shared worldview.

Grief, the personal affective response to loss or death, may be a universal expression, but the expression of grief is strongly influenced by cultural factors. Making a better experience of death—creating a shared social event including rituals—is a mechanism whereby death can be accepted, life celebrated, and the bereaved comforted as they transition to a new life without their loved one. As Firth (1964) eloquently stated, “A funeral rite is a social rite *par excellence*. Its ostensible object is the dead person, but it benefits not the dead, but the living” (p. 63).

Although organized religion likely shapes the most structured rituals associated with death, growing evidence indicates that religiously formulated funeral services in mainstream faith communities are incorporating more personalized and secular elements (Irion 1990-1991; O'Rourke, Spitzberg et al. 2011; Reeves 2011). Although religion has offered rigid standards for

rituals, it is no longer the sole means by which individuals desire to ritualize their own funerals. The growing value of individualism in a postmodern society has effected a change in funeral rituals to be “spiritual but not religious” (Ramshaw 2010). Religious rituals once considered exclusively in theological and liturgical terms have now incorporated a growing acceptance of the need for psychological and sociological aspects as an important component of the grieving process (Irion, 1990-91). Rituals now include more personalization, openness, sharing of personal narrative and a general loosening of authority structures. Alternative funerals have therefore become more accepted and sanctioned by a variety of organized religions (Bergen and Williams, 1981-82). And funerals of the religiously unaffiliated are becoming more common (Garces-Foley, 2002).

Conventional, liturgical only funerals have slowly been replaced by services that allow greater opportunities for personalization. In an exploratory study of a small, Midwestern Protestant congregation, members of the congregation expressed the belief that funerals enable the living to work through grief and the best structures for sanctioning grief include opportunities for greater involvement (Bergen and Williams, 1981-82). Personal involvement in planning, the celebration of life and/or worship and praise, the affirmation of death and transition, the use of ceremony, and group participation were all elements believed to offer increased significance of the funeral to the bereaved. Services of this nature were thought to be the best structure for working through grief and offering more support and strength for the bereaved. “The alternative plan more effectively affords . . . increased opportunity to participate . . . [and] serves as a greater strength and support for the bereaved than that afforded by a conventional funeral” (Bergen and Williams, 1981-82). With death becoming more impersonal, moving from family to funeral home, people of many cultures and religions are looking for something more personalized.

Edgework and the Motorcycling Lifestyle

Do subcultures, who the general public generally labels as “flirting with danger,” deal differently with death and dying? “Edgework” is a term used to conceptualize a sociological account for those seeking or engaging in high-risk situations (Lyng 1990; Lyng 2005). Edgework activities are theorized to be brought about by mechanisms working in Western societies, a direct consequence of a “rationalizing social world moving inexorably toward the ‘iron cage’ of bureaucratic domination” (Lyng 2005, p. 21). The growing appeal of edgework is due to a loss of enchantment with a rational, capitalistic social world and the constraints of bureaucratic domination. In a post-industrial consumer society, individuals escape from manufactured reality to “true” reality through edgework activities. As Lyng (2005) states:

Playing with boundaries in acts of transgression and transcendence, exploiting limits, and crowding edges may be the sole remaining form of resistance and one of the few possibilities for human agency that can be found in the disciplinary society. (p. 47)

By participating in these risky behaviors, “edgeworkers can be sure of their escape from death only by proving to themselves that they possess the capacity to resist it. Hence they must risk death to reaffirm their ability to escape its icy grip” (p. 35).

The motorcycling lifestyle may represent one such edgework community. Although some might argue that extreme motorcycle racing may be more in line with the classic definition of edgework, there is no doubt that motorcycling itself is an inherently risky and potentially lethal leisure activity. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, per vehicle mile traveled, motorcyclists are about 25 times more likely than passenger car occupants to die in a traffic crash. In addition, a higher percentage of motorcycle riders in fatal crashes had blood alcohol levels higher than any other type of driver (NHTSA’s National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 2011). The results of this survey are consistent with the notion that independent motorcycle club members are not intentionally drinking to increase the risks of riding while intoxicated; alcoholic consumption is merely representative of one common social activity within the lifestyle associated with many but not all independent motorcycle clubs. The Poker Run, for example, represents one such common social activity that often involves alcohol consumption during group rides. Although it is recognized that this activity increases the inherent risks of motorcycling, alcohol consumption is not considered essential to the enjoyment and satisfaction of riding. Rather, it is the socialization, camaraderie and sense of brotherhood and community membership that appeals to club members. Members, however, are aware of the associated increased risks and dangers. This raises the question of how club members engaged in the risky activities of motorcycling deal with the possibility of death.

The Susquehanna Motorcycle Club

The majority of independent motorcycle clubs represent a group of law abiding citizens from all walks of life who share a common love of motorcycles (Maxwell, 1998). Although fiercely independent, many of these club members also share a common motorcycling culture imbued with rituals. Rituals are an important component of motorcycle clubs, and define everything from initiation, membership, attire, rules of the road, and even marriage and funerals (Davis, 1982; Hopper and Moore, 1983; Kemp, 1989; Austin, 2009). Although these rituals are well known and recognized, even among non-bikers, most of the current knowledge results from ethnographic studies involving direct observation of the motorcycle lifestyle by participating in or joining motorcycle clubs (Hopper and Moore, 1983; Kemp, 1989; Austin, 2009). The intent of this study was to examine, via a short survey, how members of independent motorcycle clubs, particularly those of the Susquehanna Motorcycle Club (SMC), viewed these funeral and mourning rituals.

The Susquehanna Motorcycle Club is nestled between the glacial moraines of central Pennsylvania. The club was established in 1946 by five returning war veterans with a love for motorcycle racing. The purpose of the club, according to their bylaws, is:

to promote and foster active and spectator interest and participation in motorcycle riding and motorcycle sportsmen’s events, and the fellowship and sociability incidental to all Club activities.

Figure 1: The Susquehanna Motorcycle Club in the 1950s and today



A small patch of land, sitting on a bed of shale, was purchased and the first track was a simple drag strip where drag racing and field events were held. In the early 1950s a “clubhouse” was constructed, nothing more than a basement with a roof at ground level; spectators would stand on the roof to watch the drag races. In the late '50s a few turns were added to the drag strip as well as a first floor addition to the clubhouse; the bar was now at ground level, which probably saved a few scraped shins. The SMC gained charter membership in the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) in 1946 and actively promoted competitive motorcycling events throughout the '60s and '70s.



Figure 2 (left): Scrambles at the SMC, circa 1960s



Figure 3 (right): Scrambles at the SMC, circa 1970s

Declining interest in motorcycle racing, increasing insurance costs of hosting competitive racing events, and a tragic and fatal drag race collision that claimed two lives slowly took its toll. By the early '80s a deafening silence descended; the sounds of drags, scrambles and cheering crowds disappeared and motorcycle racing was no longer the main attraction at the Susquehanna Motorcycle Club.

Figure 4: SMC Toy Run, 2011



Today, the SMC is considered more of an independent motorcycle club for those mostly interested in a motorcycling lifestyle and motorcycle riding. The SMC was chosen for this study because the author has been a member of this independent motorcycle club since 1999 and currently serves as its Vice President. History, high membership, accessibility and willingness to participate in this survey made it an obvious and excellent first choice for this exploratory study.

Method

Survey Monkey was used to create a survey related to biker funerals. The survey included a request for some simple demographic information, and a series of open-ended questions (see Table 1). An invitation to participate in the survey was distributed by e-mail and in hard copy. The e-mail invitation was sent to 133 (of a total of 152) members of the Susquehanna Motorcycle Club (SMC), located in Milton, Pennsylvania. Additionally, a hard copy of the survey was distributed at one club meeting for those members without an e-mail address. The e-mail invitation also included a message to forward the survey to any other motorcycle rider who might be interested in participating.

Table 1. Open Ended Survey Questions

List the specific rituals of a "biker" funeral that you are aware of (e.g. drive-by salute).
What specific rituals of a "biker" funeral appeal to you?
Why is having rituals of a biker funeral important to you?
How does participating in a "biker" funeral help you grieve for the fallen biker?
Do you believe these rituals are important to the family of the fallen rider? In what way?
Describe why you wear a "memory patch" and its significance to you.

A second survey asked a single question regarding the wearing and display of a memory patch. Invitations to the "Memory Patch" Survey were distributed only to the 133 SMC members having an e-mail address.

Results

A summary of the survey results can be found in Tables 2-4. There was a total of forty-five (N=45) responses, twelve (12) from hard copy. Table 2 shows the demographic information for the study respondents. The response rate was about 30% (of total membership) for the initial survey and 13% for the patch survey. Most respondents were male (80%), between the ages of 41-60 (67%), and had been riding for more than 20 years (40%). There was only a slight difference in the percentage of respondents who had military service (44%) and those who had not served (56%). Military service was considered important not only because of the origins of the SMC, but also because of its association with the historical origins of motorcycling clubs in the United States. The overwhelming majority of respondents both desired to include "biker" elements in their own funeral service (98%), and held a strong belief that these rituals were an important and positive service for both themselves and the grieving families (96%).

Table 2. Demographics

	(# Responses) %
Gender	
Male	(36) 80%
Female	(9) 20%
Age	
20-40	(6) 13%
41-60	(30) 67%
>60	(9) 20%
Years Riding	
0-10	(12) 27%
11-20	(15) 33%
>20	(18) 40%
Motorcycle Club Member	
Yes	(43) 96%
No	(2) 4%
Military Service	
Yes	(20) 44%
No	(25) 56%
Preferred Type of Funeral Service	
Conventional Only	(1) 2.2%
Include "biker" elements	(44) 98%
Belief that rituals are important to family	
Yes	(43) 96%
No	(2) 4%

Table 3 lists the eclectic occupations of respondents; the 45 respondents held a total of twenty-eight different occupations. Members of a total of eight motorcycle clubs responded with The Susquehanna Motorcycle Club representing the greatest number of respondents (76%); only a handful of other clubs were represented, the Masonic Motorcycle Club being second at

13% (6 respondents) and all other clubs at less than 7% with 3 or fewer respondents. Seven respondents (16%) identified themselves as members of several different clubs (see Table 4).

Table 3. Occupation

Accountant
 AMS Oil Dealer
 Business Owner (2)
 Career Military
 Carpenter/ Foreman
 Corrections (3)
 Custodial Maintenance
 Disabled Veteran
 Equipment Operator
 Federal Correctional Officer
 Funeral Director
 Homemaker
 Hospital
 Professional/Technical
 Laborer (4)
 Law Enforcement
 Legal Assistant
 LPN
 Maintenance Supervisor
 Mechanic (3)
 Medical Professional
 Military
 Purchasing Agent
 Retired (6)
 Sales
 Self-Employed
 Semi-Retired
 Tattoo Artist And Body
 Piercer
 Truck Driver (2)

Table 4. Motorcycle Club Membership

	# (%), N=45
Susquehanna Motorcycle Club	34 (76%)
Masonic Motorcycle Club	6 (13%)
American Legion Riders	3 (7%)
Montour Motorcycle Riders	2 (4%)
Buffalo Valley	1(2%)
South Penn Enduro Riders	1(2%)
Susquehanna Valley Big Twins	1(2%)
Wild Pigs	1(2%)

Most respondents answered all the open-ended questions. The most common answers to the question, "List the specific rituals of a 'biker' funeral that you are aware of," are shown in Table 5. The most frequent responses were Escort/Parade (54%), Drive-By-Salute (34%), Wearing/Display of Club Colors (16%) and Party/Celebration (14%).

Table 5. Biker Funeral Rituals

<i>List the specific rituals of a "biker" funeral that you are aware of.</i>	# Mentioned (%), N=44
Escort/Parade	24 (55%)
Drive-By Salute	15 (34%)
Wearing/Display of club colors	7 (16%)
Party/Celebration	6 (14%)
Club members as pall bearers	5 (11%)
Black band across club colors	4 (9%)
Military Honors	4 (9%)
Burial with club colors	2 (5%)
Eulogy by club members	2 (5%)
Missing Man Ride	1 (2%)
<i>What specific rituals of a "biker funeral appeal to you?</i>	# Mentioned (%), N=44
Escort/Parade	16 (36%)
All/Anything	9 (20%)
Drive-By Salute	5 (11%)
Club members as pall bearers	3 (7%)

Black band across club colors	2 (5%)
Burial with club colors	1 (2%)
Club Celebration/Party	1 (2%)
Eulogy by club members	1 (2%)
Missing Man Ride	1 (2%)
Race flag	1 (2%)
Wearing of colors	1 (2%)

Similar responses were given in answer to the question, "What specific rituals of a 'biker' funeral appeal to you?" The most popular rituals that appealed to individuals were Escort/Parade (36%), Drive-By-Salute (11%), and having club members serve as pallbearers (7%). In addition, a large percentage of respondents indicated that, as an individual, all "biker" funeral rituals appealed to them (20%). There were also additional responses that included allusions to the specific symbolic significance of these rituals. Connectedness held significant importance. This sense of connectedness was represented on several different levels. A sense of brotherhood was shared by two male members, both 41-60 years old but with different years of riding experience. A carpenter/foreman with greater than 20 years riding experience made the following comment, "[it's] Brothers sending you on the way (not allowed Viking funeral anymore)," while a Federal Corrections Officer of 11-20 years riding experience held significance to "The togetherness of all Brothers & Sisters, no matter what club or organization they belong to." For other riders, the connectedness was extended from immediate club members to include the club member's family. Two female members, aged 41-60 years old, included reference to this extended family. An LPN (licensed practical nurse) of 0-10 years riding experience said, "The support that fellow riders give to family," and a homemaker of 0-10 years riding experience expressed a very strong family commitment:

It's my family. Your "family" pays their respects. You or the survivors are honored by the respect shown by the club. If biking and your club members were important in your life, then it should be done. IT IS A FAMILY CHOICE.

This sense of connectedness with others was also extended to the wider community, of which these independent motorcyclists felt they were vital members rather than a fringe group. A 41-60 year old female of 11-20 years riding experience who was employed as a legal assistant felt "Being a part of a caring community rather than the 1%-ers" was important, while a male, semi-retired member greater than 60 years old with 0-10 years riding experience mentioned the importance of "Letting the public know that bikers are people also." All these comments were symbolic of the importance of brotherhood, family, community and support.

Table 6. Major Themes of Grieving/Mourning

How does participating in a "biker" funeral help you grieve for the fallen biker?

	# Mentioned (%), N=44
Brotherhood/Camaraderie	12 (27%)
Remembrance	12 (27%)
Respect	6 (14%)
Celebration	6 (14%)
Family	3 (7%)
Lifestyle	3 (7%)
Contemplation	3 (7%)
Consolation	2 (5%)
Honor	2 (5%)
Support	2 (5%)

Why is having rituals of a "biker" funeral important to you?

	# Mentioned (%), N=44
Lifestyle	18 (41%)
Brotherhood/Camaraderie	10 (23%)
Respect	6 (14%)
Family	5 (11%)
Friendship	5 (11%)
Remembrance	4 (9%)
Celebration	3 (7%)
Support	1 (2%)

In what ways to you believe these rituals are important to the family of the fallen rider?

	# Mentioned (%), N=39
Family	14 (36%)
Respect	6 (15%)
Support	6 (15%)
Understanding	6 (15%)
Caring	5 (13%)
Remembering	5 (13%)
Brotherhood/Camaraderie	4 (10%)
Loved	2 (5%)
Recognition	2 (5%)
Celebration	1 (3%)
Closure	1 (3%)
Community	1 (3%)
Honor	1 (3%)
Lifestyle	1 (3%)
Participation	1 (3%)

In response to the three open-ended questions dealing with the meaning, significance and importance of these rituals to individual club members and families, similar language or themes were identified. The major themes in response to each of these questions can be found in Table 6. The most frequent answers to the question, "How does participating in a 'biker' funeral help you grieve for the fallen biker," included the general themes of remembrance, respect, and celebration. Consider the following comments that include the theme of remembrance.

"It is a great way to remember a fellow biker. It is like having one last ride with them."—*female, 41-60 years old, certified nursing assistant, 0-10 years riding*

"Contemplate my own mortality. Remember and celebrate the life of another biker."—*male, >60 years old, medical professional, 0-10 years riding*

"It lets us all remember how fleeting life can be. I expect my bike to be at my funeral (unless smashed). It's all about remembering and letting go."—*male, 41-60 years old, carpenter/foreman, >20 years riding*

Although each of these participants expresses the importance of "remembrance," the use of the word has different contextual meaning. The woman expresses remembrance of the individual biker and the connectedness of riding with him/her, whereas the 60-year-old man reflects upon his own mortality as well as remembering and celebrating the lost fellow rider. The 41-60-year-old man reflects on the brevity of life. This is similar to the previous man's contemplation of mortality but also considers how fleeting life can be.

Comments including the theme of respect also had specific context. One man, 41-60 years old, a business owner riding for greater than 20 years wrote, "To show respect for a spirit like mine." A woman in the same age group, a homemaker riding 0-10 years wrote, "It shows respect for the fallen biker who was a member of my 'family.' I know it would be important to them and their family appreciates it." The man was reflecting back on his own spirit as an individual whereas for the woman, respect was not specifically directed to herself, but to the lost rider, the rider's family and the wider community of all motorcycle riders; she expressed a greater sense of connectedness and community.

Women's reflections often reflected this notion of connectedness and community. Consider the following two comments regarding the theme of celebration. The woman believed celebration was important to all lives, whereas for the man it was mostly about the specific fallen rider.

"Celebrating life and seeing through life's end is important to all lives."—*female, 41-60 years old, legal assistant, 11-20 years riding*

"For me the grieving is done by the time the funeral takes place. The biker's gathering is a celebration of the fallen."—*male, 41-60 years old, corrections, >20 years riding*

In response to the question, "Why is having rituals of a 'biker' funeral important to you?" the most common response was lifestyle, followed by brotherhood/camaraderie and respect. Lifestyle was expressed literally, as from these two female riders:

"Lifestyle."—*female, >60 years old, tattoo artist, >20 years riding*

"It's part of my lifestyle and I appreciated it as a farewell."—*female, 20-40 years old, business owner, 0-10 years riding*

Or, by inference:

"I consider myself a biker."—*male, 41-60 years old, mechanic, >20 years riding*

"For all my biker friends to remember the years we rode together."—*male, >60 years old, truck driver, >20 years riding*

"Because it shows who we are and what we do as a group."—*male, 41-60 years old, custodial maintenance, >20 years riding*

"To show family that bikers are family also."—*male, 41-60 years old, Retired, Bureau of Prisons, >20 years riding*

A shared sense of loss was also reflected in these responses, and the importance of the motorcycle family grieving along with the immediate family. These expressions could be succinct and to the point, an example being that of a 41-60-year-old male laborer of 0-10 years riding experience who wrote, "Shows respect to family." Other times the expression was more descriptive. A female disabled veteran, 41-60-years-old who had been riding 11-20 years wrote, "It would be comfortable to be escorted 'home' by brothers and sisters of the club and most importantly to let the family know that their loss is shared."

Remembrance, family, friendship and respect: these represent the predominant reasons in answer to the question, "In what way do you believe these rituals are important to the family of the fallen rider?" Intermingled within these responses was the understanding that the motorcycle lifestyle represented a fabric woven of many diverse, yet inseparable and connected threads, each thread, in its own way providing support to the bereaved and grieving family, rendering the fabric torn but intact. Again, some responses were direct and to the point:

"It helps the family remember and celebrate the life of their loved one."—*male, 20-40 years old, military, 0-10 years riding*

"Helps to bring some closure to family, and lets family know that his bikers and his club remember him."—*male, 41-60 years old, laborer, 11-20 years riding*

Other expressions alluded to the notion of a shared loss by not only the immediate family, but also the family of bikers:

“When the Club participates, the family knows that their family member was important to us, and the loss of not just theirs, but ours too.”—*male, 41-60 years old, retired, 11-20 years riding*

“It gives the family a glimpse into their loved ones lives and how they lived. Bikers also give moral and spiritual support.”—*female, 41-60 years old, purchasing agent, 11-20 years riding*

The motorcycling lifestyle was mentioned frequently. The choice of a motorcycling lifestyle does not marginalize nor isolate members from the greater community, nor do these club members consider themselves as outsiders. Rather, as these poignant responses express, membership in the motorcycling lifestyle enriches their commitment to family and community.

“It shows the family that the fallen rider was loved and respected by many people; we may wear leather and look a little rough around the edges but we feel the loss just [like] anyone else does. The fallen rider knew us as a biker, not someone who comes to pay their last respect in a 3 piece suit and try to be something that [sic] are not.”—*male, 41-60 years old, Federal corrections officer, 11-20 years riding*

“Because this is the lifestyle that he/she has chosen, their family is surely familiar and most likely comfortable around other bikers and their families. Just knowing that their friends and family have chosen to perform these rituals, it would surely be important to them in honoring and remembering their loved one this way.”—*male, 41-60 years old, maintenance worker supervisor, 11-20 years riding*

“Family does not know how much this person touched life in their travels. They know he rides and has friends but not how many friends and when they see 50 plus bikes and all the leather & colors, the sound of all the bikes starting, revving. The family knows that this was his life and he loved it.”—*male, 41-60 years old, corrections, 11-20 years riding*

Responses to the “Memory Patch” survey are shown in Table 7. The most important reason was remembrance, followed by family/friendship and respect (see comments in Table 8).

Table 7. Memory Patches

<i>Describe why you wear a "memory patch" and its meaning to you.</i>	# Mentioned (%), N=44
Remembrance	12 (80%)
Family/Friendship	8 (53%)
Respect	4 (27%)
Still Riding	3 (20%)
Honor	1 (7%)
Contribution	1 (7%)
Tribute	1 (7%)
Appreciation	1 (7%)

Table 8. Memory Patch Comments

I wear a patch for all the fallen service members because without their sacrifice, we would not hold our current rights and privileges as a free nation. I will not wear a patch for someone I did not know, or would count that person as a true reliable, trustworthy friend. Just to remember good friend.

In my opinion, memory patches are worn to keep our fellow riders remembered.

I wear Memory Patches to honor the memory of Family, Friends & even Pets in my life!!!

Because he or she was a good friend and rode many miles together, went thru good and bad times, and will be friends forever. That's why I carry all my patches.

The patches help me to keep remembering our Bros. that are no longer with us, every time I put my vest on. With the patches on my vest, it gives me a sense that the person is still riding with me.

I do not wear any memory patches, just have new skull tattooed on me, just my thing!

I wear a memory patch to acknowledge that the person on the patch was a part of my life, to keep their memory alive and to show respect to them as a fellow biker ... and even though they can no longer ride I still have them with me when I ride.

As a tribute to a fallen brother that they will never be forgotten. People see these patches and ask questions or tell stories of those that the patch is dedicated to. The patch keeps making memories.

To pay respect, and my way of saying I will always remember.

To continue remembrance and show respect for a fallen brother or sister.

To let other bikers know of a brother/sister has passed away and the dates of his/her life. It also shows that person's family they meant something to other people, that they really did mean more to other bikers, friends, and family alike.

I wear memory patches because it's a great way to remember someone that you rode many miles with.

Why to many as myself it shows a respect to the guys you have spent many hours with in your life. To me I'm very proud to display a patch from the friends I had just a reminder to me to never forget about them. I also carry in my leather jacket the memory bulletins from all my friends that have passed. They ride with me if you will, maybe I shouldn't and should move on with my life BUT I can't ever forget about the great guys they were to me, that's why.

Memory patches are a way to remember a brother or a fallen soldier and they serve that purpose well. Also, it is important to show your appreciation for that person and their contributions they have made to your club. It's significant to me because it bonds me to

the past: Live for the future but never forget the past! I didn't have the pleasure to meet some of the people so what better way to honor them.

I wear memory patches to remind me of my lost members of my club, or friends that I have met riding motorcycles, feel that it is something that is great for the club and for myself to remember our fallen members or friends and is a constant reminder of my members and friend of my club and other clubs... great way to remember them.

Discussion

Funeral and mourning rituals within the biker community are really not much different from conventional funerals. Several important components of grieving rituals—preserving social bonds, symbolic elements and remembrance—were all well-articulated and expressed in this survey.

One important and respected ritual involved variations on the “missing man” formation. The “missing man” ritual originated in Britain sometime during World War I (Air Power Development Center, 2009), in military air services. Although its exact origins are obscure, the tribute shows love, respect and camaraderie in honor of lost members. This ritual was designed to honor and memorialize military veterans and aviators at their funeral service, and involved an air maneuver where the wingman spirals off and flies into the sunset, or it is flown with an empty space where another airman should be.

In motorcycle funerals, the missing man ceremony can take several forms, signifying the loss of a member. Most independent motorcycle clubs have a club-specific patch that is typically displayed on the back of a riding vest or jacket. The missing man can be symbolized by the placement of a strip of black tape running diagonally across the club patch, running from the upper left to the lower right (i.e., through the heart first) to signify the loss of a rider. In addition, the missing man ritual may also borrow from the traditional flyby ceremony, wherein an empty space is allotted at the front of a motorcycle procession following the funeral car. Most often, both rituals are performed. The significance of black seems to have a common ancestry to Victorian times, when the wearing of black attire became a visible symbol of the grieving family, and black arm-bands were often displayed (Bedikian, 2008).

Responses to the Memory Patch survey also reflected themes common to more recognized mourning rituals and mechanisms for remembrance. Memory patches are small, embroidered cloth patches of simple design (Figure 5) that are sewn onto the vest or jacket of fellow motorcycle riders; their design is common among motorcycle clubs across the United States. They are a standard size and format, with the inscription “In Memory Of” at the top, followed by name, nickname, and dates associated with the date of death or years of life. Whereas memory patches are made for every deceased rider, not everyone will necessarily wear all the available patches; some members choose to wear only patches of close friends. Generally, riders do not choose what is to be inscribed on their patch. However, during funerals, it is not uncommon for idle conversation to include statements of the name or nickname individuals would like inscribed on their patch.

Figure 5: Memory Patches



A memory patch is similar in design to a headstone. This design is almost identical to gravestone carvings of the Modern Plain Style (Hijiya, 1983), rectangular parallelepipeds with a minimum of inscription, usually name and dates. Whereas a headstone is immobile, memory patches represent a remembrance that is carried and displayed by club members for the rest of their lives, openly visible and displayed to everyone. It is not uncommon for members to wear clothing covered with dozens of patches.

Of all the rituals, memory patches bear the greatest respect and reverence. As one respondent noted, "In my opinion, memory patches are worn to keep our fellow riders remembered." However, the significance of the patches is also viewed as a means not only of memorializing, respecting and honoring lost friends, but also as accepting their death as part of the cycle of life and the ability to continue to celebrate life. "It's significant to me because it bonds me to the past; Live for the future but never forget the past!" The celebration of life not only alludes to that of the deceased, but to those who continue to live. Those in the present continue to ride and celebrate life, even without their fallen brothers or sisters, yet they continue to carry the memories of those lost individuals every time they are out riding. One respondent stated, "even though they can no longer ride I still have them with me when I ride," and another explained, "With the patches on my vest, it gives me a sense that the person is still riding with me." Respect for the memory of lost riders was also reflected in the response, "People see these patches and ask questions or tell stories of those that the patch is dedicated to. The Patch keeps making memories." In essence, the wearing of memory patches signifies the living can not only carry the memory of their friends on every future ride, but also comforts the living with the satisfaction that they, themselves, upon their passing, will continue to ride, even after death.

The honoring of deceased friends is considered important to help support the immediate family members in their grief. According to one response from a 41-60-year-old man who identified himself as a laborer with 11-20 years riding experience, the funeral ritual is designed to "help bring some closure to family, and lets the family know that his bikers and his club remember him." Support of the family, both immediate and extended, is considered important, and the lending of support and comfort a part of the culture and lifestyle of motorcycle riders. Though often fiercely independent, motorcycle riders are bound to one another through their cycling culture, and their camaraderie and empathy is willingly offered to grieving family members. A medical professional commented, "They see a side of bikers that are not readily visible to others, not usually shown by the media." One respondent, who works in a hospital, argued, "I believe it helps the related family see and understand a part of the fallen rider's life that they might not otherwise have known or understood." It appears that these responses not only reflect a desire to help the family, but also reflect an underlying desire to inform the wider community that independent motorcycle riders deserve a more worthy public perception.

This study had several limitations. Response to specific questions or topics may have been much higher if people were presented with specific options versus an open-ended survey; perhaps respondents would consider other rituals as being important to them had they been mentioned specifically. For example, there was no mention of grave goods, objects to be buried with the deceased even though this ritual was identified in previous studies (Hopper and Moore, 1983; Kemp, 1989; Elliott, 1990). In addition, this survey included responses from primarily one independent motorcycle club; the response from members of different clubs was low, or included dual membership including SMC. Finally, this study only included a total of 45 total responses. Although this response rate was low, it still represents approximately 30% of the total SMC membership; since not all members have e-mail addresses, attend meetings, nor are actively participating members (some active members joined in the 1950s, '60s and '70s), the themes may still reflect common shared beliefs of a majority of the currently active club members. Given the strong shared values of the motorcycling subculture, it is not unlikely that members from other independent motorcycle clubs may follow similar rituals. Memory patches, for example, can be observed on motorcycling attire across the nation. In future studies, it would be worthwhile to extend this survey to a wider community of independent motorcycle clubs in the United States and abroad.

Conclusions

Worden (2009) defines four tasks of mourning: (1) to accept the reality of the loss, (2) to process the pain of grief, (3) to adjust to a world without the deceased, and (4) to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life. In working through these tasks, members of the motorcycle clubs expressed themselves both profoundly and poignantly. Their love of a common motorcycling subculture has led them to articulate a shared set of mourning rituals they believe essential to themselves, their club members and the families of lost friends. These riders expressed a sophisticated, pragmatic, reflective and introspective philosophy concerning the possibility of death: "Living well now allows for a better death." What they ask of others is simple: to recognize and respect this philosophy.

As a result of their participation in edgework (to say nothing of the proliferation of sensational images in popular media), bikers have been stereotyped as deviant, antisocial and irresponsible thrill seekers; this is mistaken and misguided. Maxwell (1998) comments that "motorcycling appears to be unique in this society in that it cuts across the major categories of class, race, ethnicity, gender and age" (p. 265) and that "motorcyclists always have been mainstream Americans" (p. 275). Results of this survey substantiate Maxwell's claim. Motorcyclists are a single thread in a rich cultural American tapestry, imbued with a worldview that is more consistent than distant with American values.

There is no correct method to grieve and mourn, nor specific time period. In fact, people may grieve the loss of loved ones for the rest of their lives. The average person on the street might have a poor opinion of many motorcycle riders, with their loud bikes and free and casual ways. As it turns out, funeral and grieving rituals practiced and believed important within the biker community are mostly congruent with accepted religious and popular secular funeral ceremonies. These rituals share elements that have been identified from ancient to modern funerals; we all look to find comfort and meaning in a life we know to be ephemeral. It appears, therefore, that even given cultural and religious differences, there is much in death that binds us in life.

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