

Building Bridges to Help Families Heal

by Andrea L. Vittum

The loss of a loved one is surely one of the single most traumatic experiences of a lifetime. Recovery from that loss is essential to future well-being, yet it can be painfully difficult to achieve. At this time of need, people often turn to religion for comfort and strength. They turn to family and friends for companionship and to share thoughts and remembrances. Another source of help in the healing process, sometimes overlooked or even set aside, is the cemetery.

The cemetery can provide a symbolic bridge to maintain the connection between the living and the dead long after the death occurs. It offers many opportunities to honor, visit, remember and even communicate with the deceased. All these activities can help keep the relationship alive and fill the void created by the loss.

Think for a moment about situations in which it is not possible to bury a loved one, in which a cemetery is not a part of the healing process. This often occurs when a loved one is lost and no remains are found. Examples in recent news articles include explosions, plane crashes, military actions or abductions. In these cases, the grief-stricken often feel even greater pain and a more intense sense of loss. They experience a longer recovery period because their loved one could not be found and they could not attend a proper burial. They have no physical place to honor the loved one's memory and thus are unable to maintain the connection.

Similarly, recovery from grief can be hampered if the loved one's cremated remains are scattered or left with one relative to the exclusion of others. People whose loved one's remains have been scattered often select a cemetery memorial at a later date

because their pain has not subsided as expected. Once the permanent memorial is in place, the connection with the loved one is re-established and the healing process can finally begin.

How Cemeteries Facilitate Healing

Cemeteries help in the healing process in a variety of ways. In particular, they facilitate the following important steps to recovery:

- memorialization;
- visitation;
- participation; and
- information.

Memorialization. The memory of a loved one lost at sea or scattered over a lake will not last forever, but a monument placed in a cemetery will endure. The act of creating a permanent and personal record of a loved one's existence is an act of love, honor and respect. It plays an important role in the healing process for the survivors, and they should be encouraged to take full advantage of its benefits. Selecting just the right words, phrases and symbols to represent the relationships or interests that made the

deceased so special to them will prove highly rewarding and will lead to a great sense of satisfaction in a meaningful memorial. Often, people take particular comfort in the idea that their tribute will one day be read by persons who are as yet unborn. Truly, a lasting memorial is one of the finest gifts one can give.

Visitation. People use the opportunity to visit their loved one at the cemetery in many different healing ways. Some visit daily or weekly and some visit only on special occasions. Some just stop by briefly to say "hello," while others spend hours praying, reading, writing or communicating in their own way with the deceased. The benefit of visitation does not depend on how or how often it is used. The benefit is simply that it is available. Rather than struggling with the pain and emptiness of losing someone, survivors can be comforted by the knowledge that their loved one still has a place in this world.

Participation. Opportunities for participation in a variety of events, ceremonies, rituals and personal demonstrations of caring and love are an ongoing part of the services provided by most cemeteries. Often, the sense of loss is greatest at special times such as holidays, birthdays or anniversaries. Cemeteries offer a variety of ways to celebrate such occasions, as well as to enhance everyday visits. Individuals can:

- bring flowers to the grave site;
- have flowers placed at the grave when personal visits are not possible;
- arrange for other types of grave ornamentation, such as holiday wreaths;



For many, bringing flowers and visiting a loved one's grave site is an important part of the healing process.

process by providing information on grief management. Many cemeteries now have lending libraries on this subject or provide free pamphlets, newsletters and referrals to other sources of information, ideas and services.

In many cases, death ends suffering for one but is just the beginning of suffering for those left behind. By serving as a bridge between the two, cemeteries can help ease the suffering of the survivors. Through memorialization, visitation, participation and information, the connection between the living and the dead is maintained. A life is honored, memories are preserved, history is told and the healing process is continued.

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- join in holiday dedications of floral arrangements or live plants;
- attend patriotic observances to honor veterans;
- write in guest books or private diaries; and
- donate a tree, bench or other gift in a loved one's memory;

Marking special times in these ways can provide a great deal of comfort by helping to fill the emptiness and maintain the loved one's place in the family circle.

Commemorative acts and participation in events are especially helpful for children, who often have the greatest difficulty understanding and coping with the separation caused by death. Heaven can be a wonderful, healing promise for adults, but a more material answer often is needed to a child's question as to where a loved one has gone.

Information. Finally, the cemetery can help in the healing

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