Roadside crosses: Personal shrines in public places

by MacKenzie Scott in the July 12, 2011 issue

"You'd think they'd want to remember the person in connection with something other than the accident," a friend suggested. We had just driven past a small cross, decorated with artificial flowers, set in the tangle beyond a guardrail. We presumed it meant that someone had lost his or her life in a crash by that place. Why memorials like this were becoming more common was something that made us wonder.

Like me, my friend accepts the old custom of a church funeral and a marker in a cemetery. Though we had scattered a family member's ashes in accordance with his wishes, we had also erected a stone next to that of his parents. But we weren't sure what to make of the roadside cross.

I was reminded of those scenes in cowboy movies in which the survivors of some deadly encounter bury their dead. People are buried where they fall. A handmade cross is raised along the trail, and the mourners saddle up and ride on. In the wilderness, it's understood that graves must be convenient and observances simple. Civilization's instincts are present, but there is no settled place, no apparatus of established religion and community cemetery.

The graves along the trail are like shipboard burials. Mortality arrives while people are in passage, far from home. The dead are too far from where they began to be sent back home, and too far from where they were bound to be sent there. Circumstance has decreed that wherever they might have belonged at some other time, whether family plot or town burying ground, they belong now only to the earth. The cross reflects their instincts about things invisible, a realm now their own.

When the wagon train or the cattle drive arrives, when the settlers settle, the people no longer need improvised graves. Cemeteries are established. Tombs are laid out like homes along their own avenues, and families and faith groups inhabit their own sections. Somebody keeps records and orders things, parceling out the ground by plan. That's how civilization accommodates the dead.

But what do the roadside crosses mean today? It can't be that the poor souls who died at this corner or by that tree didn't come from a place that has its own cemetery. Most likely they are interred in family plots, lying in conventional caskets or urns beneath family names, just like the generations before them, and this monument is additional.

Even if that is true, even if the roadside cross is in addition to burial in a community graveyard and not a substitute for it, something has changed. Going to a funeral and gathering in a cemetery doesn't serve us as it once did. People find satisfaction in erecting crosses along the public way.

I am reminded of a scene in a film made of the novel *I Heard the Owl Call My Name,* in which a priest is assigned to work with Native Americans. Early in the story he performs a funeral for a person from his parish. Afterward he is disturbed to notice that the mourners have proceeded to do their own rituals as well. Outwardly the old faith has given way to Christian customs, but when an event really matters to people, the old faith reasserts itself. What people believe in is the local thing, the personal thing, and not the institution that has worked for centuries to substitute revelation for what comes naturally.

The roadside crosses can't be appearing because graves and tombstones cost too much. A century ago the neediest among us formed associations of their own and paid in the little they had to assure themselves a proper burial. Today, those who sell life insurance policies still count on the instinct that values a traditional funeral.

The crosses must be part of that sea change of attitude about institutions and establishments. Old usages are not seen as venerable. Their long heritage lends them no weight. At one time, going through the same rites of passage as others in one's community seemed to confer dignity; today many people cherish the particular and the personal. The marker where someone died reflects that the deceased was unique, the sole dead person whose meaning is tied to that time and place. This distinction may not speak to everyone, but apparently it matters to the mourners who stop along the roadway to place the marker.

Perhaps old religions, despite their dream of embracing the world and converting countless souls to their practices, fail to embody an egalitarian spirit. One thing the roadside crosses announce is that this departed soul is as worthy of an informal shrine as a deceased celebrity, and that this departed loved one is as deserving of the attention of passersby as anyone else. No longer are public monuments subscribed by clubs and conferred on parks. Public monuments can be the work of one.

Perhaps the proliferation of crosses along the byways is another instance of the dream of getting off the grid and defying the stifling conventions of civilization. A traditional cemetery, with its balance of individual grave and collective location, may simply seem too impersonal in a world that has become anxious about personal freedoms. That's part of the heritage of America: to resist the pull of community as well as seek it, and to insist on one's own entity as adequate against the presumption and pride of the sophisticated and the settled. That ambivalence about community is on display in westerns.

Something about our time has tugged us back toward being a law unto ourselves and made us value individual experience and expression over the collective heritage of institutions.