

*Essay*

## **Death, Dying and Bereavement in Norway and Sweden in Recent Times**

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**Abstract:** One of my research projects examines pictorial symbols and epitaphs on gravestones in Norway and Sweden. The focus has been on the 1990s and the 2000s. The choice of this period is motivated by the fact that new national burial laws were adopted in both countries in the early 1990s. These laws provided the next of kin with the possibility of choosing memorial symbols and inscriptions more freely than had previously been the case. To judge from the data under study, individual symbols have gained popularity, especially in Sweden, while Norway has been more faithful to earlier traditions of a collective character; moreover, secular motifs are more manifest on the gravestones in Sweden than in Norway. Another research project analyses memorial websites on the Internet related to persons who have died in recent years. The all-inclusive issue in these studies concerns mourners' expressions of their emotions and beliefs regarding the deceased person's afterlife, that is, beliefs in after-death existence. Belief in the deceased being somewhere in heaven is common. Belief in angels is also a popular concept in memorial websites. Moreover, in Sweden, this includes deceased pets as well. The previously strictly observed distinction between humans and pets has become indiscernible in Sweden. Norwegian practice, however, remains critical towards this type of "humanlike characterization". In Norway, memorial websites for the deceased are generally associated with more traditional Christian concepts than are similar sites in Sweden. By contrast, in Sweden, one observes a kind of diffuse religiosity reminiscent of New Age ways of thinking, according to which the individual plays the central role, and glorification of afterlife existence prevails. Secularization, that is, a decline in the influence of traditional forms of religious experience, is conspicuously more prominent in Sweden. Within the project on memorial websites, I have performed a special study of memorials of persons who have committed suicide. In Norway, differences between suicide and deaths by other

causes are conceived in an entirely different manner than on memorial websites in Sweden. There, the contrast between suicide and other forms of death has been increasingly wiped out. Norway has preserved earlier mortuary traditions to a greater extent, and no notions of a bright afterlife, or of angels, are to be found in connection with suicides.

**Keywords:** afterlife; collective mentality; cross-national comparisons; gravestone symbols; individual characteristics; memorial Internet websites; secular views; tradition

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## 1. Introduction

Questions concerning death, dying and bereavement in Norway and Sweden have constituted a major theme in my research in recent years. In this paper, I examine the choice of symbols made for gravestones and in messages on memorial Internet websites. What differences and similarities can be observed in cemeteries and on memorial websites? What can cause these differences? Do concepts of postmortem existence persist and how are they expressed? My projects have been realized in cooperation with the Nordic Network of Thanatology, NNT, established in Ålborg, Denmark, in 2010 [1].

## 2. Gravestone Symbols from the 1990s Onwards

One research project has been concerned with the choices of pictorial symbols and epitaphs on gravestones in Norway and Sweden. The focus has been on the 1990s and the 2000s, motivated by the fact that new national burial laws were adopted in the early 1990s. These laws gave the next of kin the opportunity to choose motives more freely than was the case earlier. A gravestone is a physical and lasting material expression witnessing to the deceased's life. I have focused on the differences between Norwegian and Swedish gravestones and how to explain them. Openness to innovations and individual characteristics have been compared to established traditions and collective mentality. The source material under study consists of 2000 photographs taken in seventy cemeteries in an area ranging from Gothenburg, Sweden, to Oslo, Norway, covering urban as well as rural districts. I have also carried out some two hundred interviews with family members, performed primarily in cemeteries ([2], pp. 13–15).

To begin with, *characteristically Norwegian bronze figurines* fastened to gravestones, including portraits of the deceased in bronze and bronze lettering, were introduced in the late 1980s and henceforth became the fashion. An example of a bronze portrait from the gravestone erected in 1998 in memory of a middle-aged carpenter can be seen in Idd cemetery in the southern part of Norway (Figure 1). No signs of such bronze figurines have been found in Swedish cemeteries, as in Sweden stonecutters did not sell bronze objects. This difference between Norway and Sweden may be ascribed to differences in fashion; it cannot be related to any observable difference in opinions and beliefs. Figurines as such do not differ but their material does, in this case bronze.

Norway developed into a *gender neutral* country earlier and more consistently than Sweden, a point manifest in the fact that the name of the spouse who died first, irrespective of sex, was earlier inscribed to the left or positioned higher up on the gravestone in Norway, placements understood in both countries to be the primary position. The name of the surviving spouse was placed to the right (Figure 2) or

under that of the first deceased, in other words, in the secondary position. Sweden appears to have been more tradition-bound in this respect during the latter part of the 1900s. Previously, however, the man's name was placed uppermost even in Norway. One may presume that the equality debate, which has long dominated the public sphere in Norway, could have contributed to the fact that social customs were discontinued in this country much earlier than in Sweden.



**Figure 1.** A bronze portrait fastened to the front of a gravestone erected in memory of a fifty-two-year-old carpenter in 1998 in Idd cemetery, Norway. A bronze bird has been set on the top of the stone. The hammer symbolizing a craft is very rare in Norway. Text: “Remembered with love”. Photo: Anders Gustavsson.



**Figure 2.** A woman's name inscribed to the right in 1996, with the space on the left preserved for her surviving husband's name. This crematory urn gravestone, decorated with a woodbine, a flower of the Bohuslän province in Sweden, is located in the cemetery in the coastal village of Hunnebostrand. Photo: Anders Gustavsson.

In Norway the *reuse of old gravestones* is quite common, but it has been unusual in Sweden until the present time. Before being reused, the stone surface is ground smooth, and new inscriptions and

symbols are carved in. In this way one retains links with past traditions by preserving the shape of the stone. Reuse also agrees with the ideas of environment protection characteristic of modern society.

*Christian pictorial symbols* and epitaphs are far more common in Norway than in Sweden, where secular and popular religious expressions tend to dominate. However, in Norway Christian symbols are related to a greater awareness of tradition rather than a greater regard for religion [3]. This is especially noticeable in the use of the cross, which not only in Sweden but also in Norway has become a symbol of death and sorrow. Owing to a greater concern for traditions in Norway, the use of cross is retained to a greater degree than in Sweden. In Sweden, innovations associated with the use of more cheerful and worldly symbols than the cross have become popular. Birds, various wild animals, and flowers (See Figure 2) are employed as symbols expressing a more positive and lightsome view of death. This development can be related to secularization which tends to diminish traditional religious expressions in public consciousness [4].

In Norway, worldly pictorial symbols on gravestones are fairly often combined with Christian symbols or epitaphs, which seems to reflect a greater degree of religious consciousness. The symbol of a boat or ship, which in Sweden stands for occupational or leisure time interests, in Norway may be combined with a religious inscription in which life is presented as a voyage. Eternity is then a shore on the far side of the sea. The darkness of death is illuminated by Jesus' name (Figure 3). An anchor or flowers entwined with a cross can also show the merging of the sacred and the worldly.



**Figure 3.** A maritime design showing a ship at sea together with a lighthouse and the Christian inscription, “In the gloom of night Jesus’ name shines out like a lighthouse”. There is also a shining star to the left. Gravestone for a forty-three-year-old man at Vestre Gravlund cemetery, Oslo, 1986. Photo: Anders Gustavsson.

*The choice of individual characteristics* associated with the deceased is more manifest in Sweden than in Norway. Surviving relatives in Norway are not keen on highlighting individual aspects in the life of their dearly departed through a gravestone. They are more concerned with keeping up the previously used symbolism and epitaphs observable in their own cemetery and other visited cemeteries. In Norway, the next of kin usually visit cemeteries to study gravestones and designs there before they make their own choices. This is known to stonecutting companies and cemetery personnel.

One follows traditions instead of searching for variations and innovations. In other words, collective mentality is stronger than the presentation of individual identity. The gravestone is not considered a proper place for attracting special attention. In this, one can see how in Norway, a more egalitarian society with fewer social distinctions than in Sweden, one is unlikely to demonstrate the status of the deceased on gravestones. In a socially hierarchical society, it is important to mark one's status, which accounts for the greater variety in choices of symbols and epitaphs in Sweden.

The use of *new symbols for occupations*, especially on gravestones of men, has become popular in Sweden since *ca.* 1990. This is common among peasants, workers and craftspeople, not only among the middle and upper classes. In Norway, however, pictorial symbols indicating occupation are rare (See Figure 1), whereas professional titles are inscribed in the same manner as in earlier traditions. This does not apply solely to high status occupations, such as teaching, building or dentistry, but also to workers. This is a further example of how the established order, apart from religious influence, is usually preserved in Norway and not rejected to the same extent as in Sweden.

*Leisure time symbols* on Swedish gravestones have acquired various expressions since the 1990s. This especially applies to city dwellers and less to people from rural districts, except for animal symbols which stand for the deceased's interest in hunting or pet animals. Leisure time or recreation symbols are often related to masculine fields of interest, such as sailing, leisure boating and sporting activities, such as soccer, tennis, ice hockey (Figure 4), and horse racing. In some cases, women's interests can be also expressed by gravestone symbols. So far, symbols of leisure time and sports activities have not been found on Norwegian gravestones. This corresponds to the fact that individual expressions on gravestones, as well as the use of innovative symbols, are not as widespread in Norway as in Sweden. In Norway, the grave is a place where relatives prefer following the existing models, not making an effort to distinguish themselves from others.



**Figure 4.** An ice hockey player incised on the gravestone of the twelve-year-old Johnny Sundling, 1983–1995, in Norum Cemetery in Bohuslän, Sweden. Photo: Anders Gustavsson.

When an individual's self-realization becomes a goal of social achievement, this can find its expression in memorials, thus reflecting values characteristic of the present-day society. This is the case in Sweden. Striving to emphasize individual values and achievements can also explain why in Sweden, in marked contrast to Norway, the next of kin are so engaged in the choice of gravestones, pictorial symbols, and special inscriptions. In my Swedish data, again in contrast to Norway, there are several examples of the deceased having themselves in advance suggested symbols for their gravestones in order to highlight characteristics of their lives. In this way, one attempts to keep one's memory alive for at least a certain amount of time into the future. In my Norwegian data, I have not found any example of the deceased having expressed preferences concerning the appearance of their gravestones.

### 3. Concepts of Faith on Memorial Internet Websites

A further research project consisted of a study of memorial websites on the Internet related to persons who died in recent years [5–7]. This new medium affords undreamt of and hitherto quite unexploited opportunities for cultural research, as it provides access to emotions, beliefs, and experiences [8]. Such memorial websites began appearing in the 2000s, and they have noticeably increased in the past few years. On these websites, relatives and friends express their feelings about, and to, the deceased person. Since messages and imaginary conversations are published on the Internet, they are also accessible to outsiders, including scholars. My research material deals with memorial websites available during 2009 and 2010 in Norway and Sweden, with the most extensive material coming from Sweden<sup>1</sup>. These memorial websites were for the most part set up by women who had suffered extreme grief in their immediate relationships. Persons who contribute to guest books are primarily those who have recently experienced a tragic loss of their loved one. These websites have become a virtual meeting place, giving mourners an opportunity to express their emotions and beliefs and escape the feeling of loneliness in their grief. A new social fellowship arises, which is neither restricted in terms of space nor related to previous contacts in one's life. This was not possible before the age of the Internet. Memorial websites help to keep the memory of the deceased alive and ensure that it will not be easily forgotten. The importance of the guest books for the next of kin is clearly shown in posted messages of gratitude.

I have only studied websites open to the public. The focus of my analysis is on messages related to faith. My research questions have been: do concepts of after-death existence persist and how are they expressed? What beliefs are associated with the deceased's afterlife status? Can the dead be aware of and perceive messages that the living send to them? Is any form of dialogue possible with them? Can the living at some future time, after their own deaths, be reunited with their dear deceased? Responding to these questions, one must also consider concepts about angels.

To judge from my data, the idea that the deceased are somewhere in heaven is rather common. There they can meet other deceased. Through messages in guest books, mourners express hopes that their relatives will be able to see each other even though they have never met before in their earthly lives. A new fellowship is assumed to take place after death. It is believed that the deceased can be contacted by the living and that the latter can even communicate with the deceased through their

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<sup>1</sup> My internet sources are recorded in ([9], p. 161). They were accessed 1 April 2011.

messages on a computer. The technical possibilities of this life are, in other words, transferable to the afterlife existence. When the deceased are in heaven, they can also watch over and protect their friends and relatives. The idea of a reunion with the deceased sometime in the future is often expressed in memorial messages. Message writers believe that the new afterlife fellowship will never end; this is something to look forward to as a consolation in grief.

A frequently expressed belief concerns children and young people becoming angels after death who can contact the living by watching over them like guardian angels. This is in striking contrast to earlier beliefs, in which the deceased were supposed to be souls, not angels. The British sociologist Tony Walter has also found a similar change concerning such beliefs in England [10]. Mothers of deceased children call themselves “Mothers of angels”. In order to enter the world of angels, the deceased must climb an infinitely long stairway (Figure 5). The meeting of the deceased with angels is described in a highly positive way. Doubts about, or absolute denial of, a form of existence after death are extremely rare in the messages under study. Belief in afterlife existence and in angels can exist even if one does not believe in God. It is notable that in Norway [11], this belief is far from being part of traditional Christian religiosity which has also become tangible in postmodern secular Sweden. The new belief is sooner part of the conceptual world created by the afflicted persons in order to find some form of consolation and emotional stability that can help them to cope with life, to go on living. In Sweden, one observes a kind of diffuse religiosity characteristic of a New Age way of thinking distinct from Christian dogmas about death. It glorifies individuals and extols the bliss of an afterlife existence free from any punishment [12–15].



**Figure 5.** Angels guard the stairs that the dead climb up into heaven [16].

Christian concepts such as God and Jesus are mentioned far more often in Norwegian than in Swedish messages. This is especially noticeable in messages written by teenagers. Thus, when Trond died in a traffic accident in Norway at 15 years of age, three girls from his school class wrote: “God loves to pick flowers, and now he has picked the finest one, that’s you, Trond”. Other school mates also mentioned God in their memorial messages about Trond. In a great number of Norwegian messages, the view that a person’s life is a loan from God which He can reclaim sooner or later is maintained. When Johanne, aged 15, died in a traffic accident in Norway in 2004, Elin wrote a poem to her parents in which God speaks. The poem begins: “For a time I’ve lent you (*i.e.*, the parents) a child of mine, said God, love her while she is on earth, and weep when she receives a word to return

to me again". I have not found similar Christian-minded messages among those written by Swedish teenagers.

At the same time, among Norwegian messages one can encounter criticism directed towards God. Thus, when the above-mentioned Johanne died in a traffic accident, one of her school friends wrote: "God needed her in heaven. God was wrong, he was just unknowing." Criticism of this kind might indicate that God and Jesus are more common concepts in Norway than in Sweden. In critical situations one is more likely to appeal to God in Norway than would appear to be the case in Sweden.

#### 4. Suicide on Memorial Internet Websites

In the previous section, I analyzed messages related to death in general. In this section, I will focus on memorial websites relating to persons who have committed suicide. These websites have the same web addresses as those commemorating other deceased persons<sup>2</sup>. Speaking openly about suicide is a remarkable contrast to the reticence of former days in such cases. It should be noted that about 1500 suicides in Sweden and about 500 in Norway are reported every year [17,18].

In Sweden, differences between suicides and other kinds of deaths have been conspicuously eliminated. Standardization processes seem to be at work in a way comparable to what has occurred in other areas of social life. According to the leading political and media norms, equality, not differentiation, has become an increasingly dominant social ideal. To attain equality, former barriers separating people must be broken. As ideas propagating equal worth for all people have become social and political ideals, this is also reflected in messages on the memorial websites. In Swedish websites, the belief in some diffuse existence after death and in reunion of the surviving relatives with the person they have lost through suicide is similar to beliefs expressed on the memorial websites to the deceased in general. The same tendency is manifest in messages which glorify and eulogize the deceased. Afterlife existence is believed to be better than the life which the deceased once had and consciously chose to leave. In the afterlife, the deceased may meet and be cared for by angels (Figure 6). The deceased themselves can become angels, as is often believed in the case of other deaths. On Swedish memorial websites, glorification of suicides is rather common, and in such messages the latter is presented as the best angel possible. No thoughts of punishment after death are ever expressed.

Norwegian memorial websites are more restrained than those in Sweden when it comes to expressing feelings about suicides. Traditional values are more influential there than in Sweden where a break with traditions has become most manifest during the 2000s. In Norway, the distinction between suicide and other kinds of death is marked in an entirely different manner. Glorification and eulogies are unthinkable, as this may tempt others to commit suicide. The risk of so-called emotional contagion (sometimes known as the "spillover effect") ought to be hindered in every possible way. By contrast, in Sweden, it is assumed that messages on memorial websites can prevent suicide by showing unfortunate effects of suicide on the closest relatives of the deceased.

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<sup>2</sup> My internet sources are recorded in ([9], p. 180). They were accessed on 1 April 2011.



**Figure 6.** “Wishing you angel-blessings today and always” [16]. This picture was published on a memorial website for Ehline, who committed suicide in 2007 at age 31.

The Norwegian data related to suicides are quantitatively meager compared to those from Sweden. This indicates that the former taboo against suicide still exists and contains elements of shame. There are no concepts of a bright afterlife or of angels for those who commit suicide. Reticence concerning speaking and writing about suicide is also noticeable in the media, even though one can observe certain changes after the new and more liberal Code of Ethics for the Norwegian Press was adopted in 2006. In Sweden, too, the media were for a long time reticent about personal names related to suicide. The death of the wrestler and European Champion Mikael Ljungberg in 2004 illustrates a radical change. It was the period when more and more memorial websites were dedicated to persons who had committed suicide. This trend correlates with the general increase in openness required and practiced in the present-day media. Interestingly, some visitors to Swedish guest books related to suicide write that what they read about suicides on the memorial websites encouraged them *not* to take their own lives. They became aware of the great suffering caused by suicide to the closest relatives and friends.

Even though equality has become part of the social ideal in Sweden, there are also differences between the websites set up for those who have committed suicide and those who have died in other ways. This is manifest in criticism of those who have taken their own lives. These people have caused extreme grief to their nearest relatives and friends. In Norway, such criticism is expressed in stronger terms than in Swedish messages, namely, by describing suicide as an expression of egoism or cowardice in those who commit this action.

One area where criticism is similar in the data from the two countries concerns deficiencies in psychiatric care. This can be explained by the fact that in some cases society has not accepted its responsibility and done too little to prevent suicide. In Sweden, harsh criticism is also aimed against suicide guides who have recently appeared on the Internet; guides of this sort offer descriptions of methods for taking one’s own life. A number of those who ultimately committed suicide obviously visited these websites. In May 2011, a website with suicide guides was closed after hard criticism on the Internet [19]. Criticism of this type does not exist in Norway, as any form of information assisting suicide is strictly forbidden by law there.

It is difficult to give an explicit answer as to why earlier traditions associated with the deceased in general and to suicides in particular are much stronger in Norway. No doubt, a higher degree of secular attitudes plays a role in Sweden, not least in the way people think about death and suicide. Another factor is the priority of individual characteristics over collective mentality, which is more manifest in

Sweden than in Norway. As shown above, it is especially noticeable in the choice of symbols on gravestones in recent times. In Sweden, one tends to regard innovation as something positive; also, the focus on exclusively bright, cheerful aspects of life is triggered by the media. It can result in covering up the sorrowful aspects of life. Also, the darkest moments in life can be presented in a positive way, and in this respect Norwegians appear to be more realistic in their faithfulness to older traditions instead of rejecting life's darker sides and suppressing their further discussion.

## 5. Narratives about Deceased Pets on Internet Memorial Websites

In this section, I present results of a pilot study on attitudes on the Internet memorial websites towards deceased pet cats. The focus is on the ways in which pet owners express their emotions and beliefs when confronted with the reality of the animal's death. Can afterlife beliefs also refer to animals, and if so, how are they expressed?

Swedish memorial websites for deceased pets began to appear at the turn of the millennium in 2000; some of them were in the form of discussion forums on which people could post their contributions and responses in a guest book. The number of such memorial websites has noticeably increased since 2005. During the 2000s, similar websites have also appeared in Norway, however, not to the same extent as in Sweden. Lengthier and more sentimental contributions are found in Sweden compared to the discussion forums in Norway<sup>3</sup>.

A recurring motif in Swedish websites is a reunion or a meeting with the deceased cat in a future transcendental existence. An expression that is often used in such messages builds on the "feline heaven" concept. This concept is a projection of earthly life; its description reproduces the conditions of animal life on earth onto the feline heaven. There are some instances in the Swedish data, as well as a few in Norwegian, of a cat being ascribed an angelic character. This is similar to the way memorial sites dedicated to humans conceptualize afterlife existence. Other angels in heaven are believed to express joy as the dead cat now enjoys a new type of existence. There is evidence recently found in Sweden, but not in Norway, that grief-stricken owners conduct conversations with their dead cats on the Internet in the hope that cats will be able to take part in the communication. Thus the dividing line between humans and pets appears to be in the process of obliteration. This contrasts with the previously maintained distinctions that kept animals outside the spiritual and religious sphere. The new tendency can be illustrated by an expression which describes how the deceased cat passed over the "rainbow bridge" to another world, the so-called "Rainbow Country", that is a place of eternal bliss (Figure 7). Belief in the pet cat's future reunion with its owners in afterlife is often expressed in the Swedish data. It is believed that after this reunion, there will be no painful parting.

Norwegian Internet websites also contain some examples expressing a belief in a fairly diffuse afterlife existence for deceased cats, but they are far from as frequent as in Sweden. It is also notable that Swedish texts on the Internet are longer and more emotional than those from Norway. Comparing these messages, one might actually speak of anthropomorphic processes, but the distinction between human and animal as spiritual beings is far more pronounced in Norway than in Sweden. Interestingly, Norwegian websites can sometimes contain a direct criticism towards "humanlike characterization".

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<sup>3</sup> My internet sources are recorded in ([9], p. 196). They were accessed on 1 April 2011.

At the same time, the “rainbow bridge” concept occasionally crops up in Norway as well, but the concepts of feline heaven and angelic existence after death are more common in Sweden. In Norway, by contrast, the spiritual dimension conveyed by pictorial symbols and texts is much more pronounced on human graves (See above).



**Figure 7.** A picture of the rainbow bridge [20].

The situation regarding animal memorial websites is entirely reversed compared with human deaths. Thus in Sweden, the spiritual dimension of afterlife existence is more pronounced in reference to animals than to humans. In their grief, the owners of pet cats may even direct their accusations towards God. Such statements about God in relation to pets cannot be found in Norwegian sites as there, religion is not involved in mourning over the death of animals. This contrast can be regarded as a sign that secular views outside of but parallel to traditional Christian attitudes are more manifest in Sweden than in Norway. The idea that one can communicate with the deceased animal is more common in Sweden. The growing emphasis on individual characteristics similar to New Age ways of thinking has obviously contributed to this trend. I have also observed a similar trend in attitudes towards people who have suddenly died as a result of accidents, murder or manslaughter [21].

To conclude, this case study has revealed fluctuations in the previous distinction between humans and pets. This tendency is far more manifest in Swedish memorial sites dedicated to pet cats, whereas similar Norwegian sites hold to more traditional values in their expressions of grief and loss.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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