

The American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress
The Ben Botkin Folklife Lecture Series

GIVING A VOICE TO SORROW: Creative Responses to Death



**Ilana Harlow, Folklife Specialist,
American Folklife Center**

**Tuesday,
March 23, 2004
12 NOON – 1:00 PM
Dining Room A**

**sixth floor of the
Madison Building, Library of Congress,
Washington, D.C.**



FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC



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GIVING A VOICE TO SORROW: CREATIVE RESPONSES TO DEATH

Over the past fifty years scholars such as Erik Erikson, Robert Butler and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, have investigated the inward reflective processes that individuals go through as they experience old age and death. "Giving a Voice to Sorrow" complements the work of these pioneering psychiatrists by exploring contemporary outward expressions of loss, love, and longing that people craft in response to death.

Many traditional responses to death involve creativity. This is evident in the stories, music, and art connected to funerary rites. In our time, in addition to these traditions and sometimes in lieu of them, it has become increasingly common for mourners and the terminally ill to craft personal rituals and memorial art in response to death. The current trend can be associated, in part, with the baby boom generation. As they move through the life cycle, they are transforming every stage of it, influencing our attitudes towards marriage, birth, and now death. Sometimes traditional responses do not satisfy. People who are not affiliated with a traditional religious community often create secular rituals to mark someone's passing. Even people who are affiliated with a religious community often feel the need for personal responses in addition to the formal institutional rites. A contemporary generation is making personal creativity an increasingly common part of death and dying.

Commemorative stories, rituals, and art are outward expressions of inward struggles. They are often physical enactments of grief and love. The narrative impulse to tell the life stories of the dead and thus to conjure up their essence, is a creative act that can counter the destructiveness of death. Stories make our dead portable; through stories we can carry them with us wherever we go. Rituals dictate how to at the best and worst moments of our lives.

Rituals can move both the dead and the living from one stage of life to the next, and they can help the living to incorporate the departed into their lives. Commemorative art is a more concrete way of keeping the dead present in our lives. We create things like gravestones, mourning quilts, shrines, and music that both express our sentiments and convey something about the personality of the deceased. The process of creating such art can sometimes feel like a ritual. "Giving a Voice to Sorrow" explores how we use commemorative art, ritual and storytelling to endure the harshness of death and to affirm life.

Folklorist Ilana Harlow will present illustrations of this trend from her fieldwork and will explore its significance. Examples include the revival of the Victorian tradition of making quilts out of the clothing of loved ones who have died; the experience of a woman who made her father's coffin; and a story of love and faith told to her by a widower in Ireland.

Dr. Harlow is Folklife Specialist at the American Folklife Center and holds a doctorate in Folklore from Indiana University where she wrote a dissertation on traditional Irish narrative. For six years she served as the Folk Arts Program Director at the Queens Council on the Arts in New York City. She curated the exhibit "Beyond the Grave: Cultures of Queens Cemeteries" at the Museum of the City of New York. She is co-author with Steve Zeitlin of *Giving a Voice to Sorrow: Personal Responses to Death and Mourning*.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world.

