

# An Online Generation Redefines Mourning

By Hannah Seligson

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In 2010, when Rebecca Soffer's father died of a heart attack on a cruise to the Bahamas, the condolence notes came pouring in, many in the form of text messages. "I got so many from very good friends," Ms. Soffer, 37, said from the couch of her Upper West Side apartment not long ago. "They said they were 'sorry' or 'how r u?' "

Text message was also the preferred medium of a 20-something who asked a funeral home in Los Angeles to text him a picture of his mother's corpse to help him avoid having to go in and identify the body. Caitlin Doughty, 29, a director at the funeral home at the time, said in a phone interview that she initially thought, "No, I'm not going to send you a text of your mother's corpse, but as someone who believes in interacting with the reality of death as intentionally as possible, I thought a text was better than nothing."

Ms. Doughty is an undertaker and the founder of The Order of the Good Death, a website about mortality. The funeral home, which had never before received such a request, asked the son to sign a form saying he understood the emotional distress that might result from the photo before sending it.

The social norms for loss and the Internet are clearly still evolving. But Gen Y-ers and millennials have begun projecting their own sensibilities onto rituals and discussions surrounding death. As befits the first generation of digital natives, they are starting blogs, YouTube series and Instagram feeds about grief, loss and even the macabre, bringing the conversation about bereavement and the deceased into a very public forum, sometimes with jarring results.



Last November, to give the topic a generationally specific space, Ms. Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner, 34, started Modern Loss, a website geared to people around their age to address many permutations of loss, from miscarriages to a parent's death. Both women have confronted the latter: Four years before Ms. Soffer's father's heart attack, her mother was killed in a car accident. And in 2004, Ms. Birkner's father and stepmother were murdered at their home in Sedona, Ariz., by a methamphetamine addict.

Ms. Soffer and Ms. Birkner found the emotional and psychological support resources for people in their early adult life-stage lacking. "I went to a family of homicide victims support group run through Safe Horizons in a church basement in Harlem when I was living on the Upper West Side and there was no one in my generation," said Ms. Birkner, a Brooklyn-based writer and editor. "Still, it did save my life." Ms. Soffer said she was the only person under 65 at the grief support groups she joined, adding that among those her own age, "I barely know anyone who had lost both their parents."

For a generation known for broadcasting internal monologue across the Internet, some of its members seem eager for spaces to express not just the good stuff that litters everyone's Facebook newsfeed, but also the painful. In November, Melissa Lafsky Wall, 35, the founder of New York-based Brick Wall Media, turned to Modern Loss after a miscarriage, posting an essay called "The Silent Sorrow." "The Internet should speak to the parts of life that we all experience, but aren't represented in most media, a large one being grief and loss," Ms. Wall said, adding that the feedback she got was all positive, which she attributes to the site. "If you are going to write about your miscarriage on Reddit, for instance, it's going to be a very different community."

Modern Loss is a repository of essays, resources and advice that the founders try to edit so that it doesn't sound glib, overly religious or trite. For instance, you'll never hear, "At least they are in a better place." ("Our least favorite line ever," Ms. Soffer said.) The website also examines decidedly 21st century topics like what to do when Gmail keeps suggesting someone who has died as a contact, a topic that Esther D. Kustanowitz, the founder of the blog My Urban Kvetch, explored in a

post called “Deleting My Mother.” Befitting the target audience, it is not overly earnest. “Stay tuned for upcoming Modern Loss events in real life,” the site’s “about us” page says. “Because misery loves company, and nachos. And margaritas.”

Ms. Soffer, a former producer at “The Colbert Report,” said of the site, “You have to have a sense of humor.”

Another mourning site speaking to the younger generation is Lisa Frank Mixtape, promising “90s Music, 21st Century Grief.” Its founder, Zoe Feldman, 29, solicits essays about human loss (sorry, no pets), sending her contributors a mix tape in return for submitting an essay about a human loss they have experienced. Named after the company Lisa Frank, known for its brightly colored products that Ms. Feldman said are to her the antithesis of grief, the venture was inspired after her former girlfriend and Smith College classmate, Rebecca Rosenthal, known as Becca, died in October 2012 at age 27.

“I went to a Shaman, a healer and every psychiatrist in Manhattan, and the only thing that helped me was talking to people my age who had experienced some devastating loss,” said Ms. Feldman, who works on business strategy for PepsiCo in New York and has mailed around 50 mixtape cassettes (she will burn a CD for those who don’t have a tape player). “One person wrote and said it’s like being part of a weird, sad tribe,” she said.

Those who are accustomed to social media as a way to tout how fabulous your life is, beware: these sites can be unflinchingly graphic and wrenching. In November, K. H. (submitters use their initials on Lisa Frank Mixtape) wrote, “My dad passed away on May 31, 2003 in my arms as I tried to give him CPR.”

Gabrielle Birkner, left, and Rebecca Soffer, who started Modern Loss, a website geared to people around their age to address the many permutations of loss, from miscarriages to a parent's death. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Ms. Doughty, the author of a forthcoming book “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes: And Other Lessons From the Crematory,” to be published by W. W. Norton in September, said she is seeing a cultural shift happening around what she calls “death awareness.” Her peers are engaging in more-open and public discussions about mortality and loss, a movement of which her “Ask a Mortician” channel on YouTube is on the frontier.

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The series has received over a million views since 2011, fielding questions such as: “How do you become a mortician?” (Go to mortuary school) and “Can you bake cremated remains into a chocolate cake?” (Yes, but it’s kind of gross.) On Ms. Doughty’s blog, contributors discuss issues like, “What do dead bodies really look like?” and “Suicide is the cause of death. Do you share?”

Meanwhile, “Girls,” the HBO show about young people making their way in modern-day Brooklyn, has twice tackled the issue of grief and death this season, first when Hannah Horvath’s e-book editor, David, is found dead in the Hudson River. “Do you happen to know another publisher that I could maybe slip the manuscript to if I decide that I really want to try to keep it alive?” Ms. Horvath asks her editor’s widow at his funeral. (She promptly tells Hannah, using an expletive, to leave the reception; the protagonist seems to become more sensitive later in the season, when her grandmother dies.)

The show also highlighted how the Internet has made grief more public and casual, and therefore more fraught. “Why aren’t you mourning quietly?” asks Adam, Hannah’s boyfriend, after she reads him a part of her editor’s obituary on Gawker,

which in real life has a tag called “And Now They’re Dead.” Twitter responses to death, like the hashtag RIP, which was widely used after the news of the fashion designer L’Wren Scott’s suicide, can also seem more like display than distress.

Ms. Birkner, a former obituary writer, said: “It’s not the nature of social media, generally, to react thoughtfully to things and think, ‘How can I really help?’ It would be great if everyone said, ‘Can I buy your groceries, or can I start a meal train?’ ”

Last February, on what would have been Ms. Rosenthal’s 28th birthday, Ms. Feldman found a long post on her dead friend’s Facebook wall from another friend speculating about how Ms. Rosenthal had died. “A lot of what she wrote wasn’t true,” Ms. Feldman said. “Becca’s mother was so upset, and I spent the whole day trying to do crisis management.” Ms. Feldman’s explanation for that kind of behavior is “performative grief,” she said, adding: “That’s the only excuse I can think of. The nature of the Internet allows for that sort of self-indulgent, ‘look at me’ behavior.” On the other hand, Ms. Birkner said she found support on Facebook on long-forgotten death anniversaries.

“It’s such a push-pull around the pros of allowing for a sense of community that the Internet builds and the distancing that it allows from having to personally interact with others, ” said Heather Servaty-Seib, a professor at Purdue in the field of thanatology, the study of death and dying, with an emphasis on adolescent grief.

Then there’s the lingua franca of social media — the like button — that’s totally discordant with death. “My God, is there anything creepier than a post announcing someone lost a loved one and seeing ‘136 people like this’ underneath?” Ms. Soffer said. Facebook floated the idea of a “sympathize button,” something that came out of its annual hackathon, but has no plans to pursue it, according to the company. (Facebook does offer an option to memorialize an account that prevents anyone from logging into it in the future, but allows friends and family, depending on privacy setting, to leave posts on the timeline.)

The fact that the Internet is perhaps not the best channel for grief (with gaffes immortalized in cyberspace) is why David Fajgenbaum, 28, the founder of National Students of AMF, a support network for college students with sick or deceased parents, said his organization of 40 chapters on campuses has been cautious about integrating an online component. “Someone could say the wrong thing online, and could really hurt someone,” said Mr. Fajgenbaum, who started the support group in his mother’s memory while an undergraduate at Georgetown.

Miss Manners, a.k.a. Judith Martin, writes rather unequivocally on the matter. “Letters of condolence should be written by hand,” she said. “Burdensome as it may be, it offers the comfort of knowing that one is representing the deceased to those who cared about him.”

But as Mr. Fajgenbaum acknowledged, young people are eager for that virtual connection; after all, technology and the Internet are a ubiquitous part of their existence. That’s what Jason Feifer, 33, creator of the instantly viral Tumblr “Selfies at Funerals,” discovered when he posted a few dozen photos of teenagers taking pictures of themselves at funerals. In doing so, Mr. Feifer, an editor at Fast Company magazine, said he was documenting a newfangled mourning practice. “It’s important for the older generation to see more than disrespect and to see some kind of genuine communication,” he said.

Admittedly, though, some of the images made him cringe, in particular the young woman who wrote: “Love my hair today. Hate why I’m dressed up #funeral.”

Mr. Feifer said, “I think there are a lot of kids who saw this Tumblr and will not take a selfie at a funeral, but it doesn’t mean that the kids who did take these photos don’t know how to grieve.”

***A correction was made on March 21, 2014: An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the surname of Gabrielle Birkner, a founder of the website Modern Loss.***

***A correction was made on March 22, 2014: An earlier version of this article misstated the position held Caitlin Doughty at a Los Angeles funeral home. She was***

*one of the directors there, not the sole director. It also misstated the name of the organization founded by David Fajgenbaum. It is National Students of AMF, not Actively Moving Forward with Grief.*

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