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# MEMORY TRIGGERS AND ANNIVERSARIES OF STILLBORN CHILDREN

## *Abstract*

Care after stillbirths has changed radically within the last twenty years, not least because of research. However, less attention has been given to memorialization in the longer perspective. This is a qualitative study based on a web questionnaire with the aim to uncover memorialization practices on anniversary days. 596 bereaved mothers of stillborn children provided an answer to an open question on how they observed the anniversary. The inductive analysis resulted in six categories of memorialization: (1) internal memorialization; (2) home-based memorialization; (3) traditional grave visits; (4) extended memorialization rituals; (5) alternative activities; and (6) coincidental activities. Different memory triggers – gifts, objects, food, and places – were used to evoke memories, honour the child, and strengthen the bonds with the child and within the family.

Keywords: stillbirth, bereavement, continuing bonds, memorialization, anniversaries, Sweden

## Introduction

A death anniversary is a day of memorialization. But how do you memorialize someone you did not get to know? What do you do, when the dead never lived outside of the womb, and you never shared any memories together? Such is the situation for parents of stillborn children. Though the grieving process for bereaved parents differs, a perinatal loss can result in life-long psychological complications (Rosenblatt and Burns 1986). Many anniversaries will pass – days that may be observed at least with a thought, a conversation about the child, or candle lighting. Not all parents of stillborn children observe their anniversary, but certainly, many do. Grout and Romanoff (2000) found three patterns in parents' stories of their perinatal loss. One group of parents had replaced the loss by focusing on their living children, while two groups maintained the connection with the stillborn, either by preserving the space or by continuing the relationship and 'finding a place for them'.

This paper examines the observance of anniversaries of stillborn children. These anniversaries are in most cases birthdays and death days at the same time, which means that parents can actually choose the character of day. Is it to be a day of joy; a day of sorrow; or could it include multifaceted feelings?

### *Previous studies and theories*

It is only during the last thirty years that grief of bereaved parents of stillborn has been acknowledged (Klass et al. 1996; Layne 2003; Rosenblatt and Burns 1986). This change in perspective is reflected in new hospital practices, where parents now are advised to see, touch, and hold the child (Gold et al. 2007; Rådestad et al. 1996), in cemeteries where stillborn children are given their own grave (Garattini 2007; Gustavsson 2003), and where monuments are raised in memory of stillborn children, who formerly were denied an official grave (Peelen 2009). The new care practices have made it possible not only to have embodied memories of the child, but also photographs of the stillborn, handprints and footprints, memorial objects that can be viewed and used long after the funeral (Godel 2007; Riches and Dawson 1998). These material objects serve as links between the parents and the stillborn, a tool for upholding a continuing bond with the dead baby, for those who wish.

The fact that strong bonds between the living and the dead exist is not new. Yet only recently have these bonds been discussed by researchers theoretically and empirically (see Rothaupt and Becker 2007 and Valentine 2006 for overviews of academic developments). Klass et al. (1996) and Walter (1996, 1999) were among the first to argue for a new perspective on grief where people refuse to follow the formerly established principle of «letting-go», and maintain continuing bonds with the dead. Since then numerous works have been done in this field (e.g. Hallam et al. 1999; Hallam and Hockey 2001; Field et al. 2005; Valentine 2008). Related to the theories of continuing bonds is the field of Material Culture. Hallam and Hockey's (2001) seminal work on memorialization as a cultural process, in time and space, highlights the importance of material objects in memorialization, an aspect often neglected in previous studies on bereavement in the West.

Within other cultures and non-Christian religions the situation has been different. Buddhist ancestor altars, sometimes with ashes from the dead ancestors, are common, and ancestor cult is part of the religiously regulated rituals (Klass and Goss 1999). Less known, and more recently scientifically observed, are home memorials in Western, traditionally Christian, countries (Francis et al. 2000; Hallam and Hockey 2001; Godel 2007; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2010). Home memorials usually consist of a table or shelf with photographs, candles, flowers, and other things, such as personal belongings or footprints. The home memorial objects have several functions for the bereaved. Photographs and personal objects are material representations of the dead, while candles and flowers can be seen as ritual objects used for private ritualization (Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2010). Godel (2007) has emphasized how the objects function as tools for narratives about the stillborn by helping the parents in «constructing, reconstructing, reinforcing and continuing the biography of the family» (2007: 259). Photographs not only



represent the history, but also the imagined or wished-for future. They act as concrete signs of the child's presence in their lives; they are important for the identity process of parenthood, both in the private sphere and in a public sphere, such as on the Internet (Bremborg 2012; Hagström 2006). Though the stillborn children are biologically dead, in many cases they are not socially dead; an important distinction brought into discussions of death by Mulkay (1993), and developed further by Hallam et al. (1999). Parents maintain the connection with the child either by preserving the space or by finding a place for them (Grout and Romanoff 2000).

In addition, grave visits reflect the interdependence between the living and dead, as reciprocal obligations continue beyond death (Francis et al. 2000). At the cemeteries, children's graves tend to differ from others by having toys and decorations belonging to the material culture of childhood (Francis et al. 2005; Gustavsson 2003; Hallam and Hockey 2001). By giving gifts parents create parental and child identities: «The use that people make of things manages to create memories, to create a notion of personhood, and to create relationships» (Garattini 2007: 203). Memories become embodied in the objects brought to the grave. Although grave visits are made all-year-round, some days are more important than others; among them, anniversaries (Francis et al. 2005). These days are emotion-laden and can cause psychological and somatic reactions (Chow 2010). For many parents of stillborn children, anniversaries cause increased pain and sadness, not only in the first few years after the death, but at times more than a decade after (Capitulo 2004; Dyregrov and Dyregrov 1999). Ribner (1998) has suggested that death anniversary rituals could be one way of coping with grief reactions. However, if and when should grief reactions in the long term be regarded as healthy or pathological, is still under debate and needs to be further researched (Chow 2010).

During the last decade critique has been raised towards previous studies of religious practices. Ammerman (2006) and McGuire (2008) have through their studies of everyday, lived religion highlighted the bricolage of religious identities or religiosities, and the multitude of individual religious practices has been highlighted, in contrast to former studies that mainly have focussed on officially defined religious practices within specific religions. This study is conducted along the same methodological and analytical line. By studying memorial practices broadly in everyday life old and new practices can be brought forth into the scientific light and analysis without forcing them into specific religions or traditions. An important part of the study of practices has been the social context of the memorialization: with whom and where does it take part? Klass (1999) has shown how the spiritual lives of bereaved parents are played out in a web of bonds and meanings that are interplaying: how the universe works, place and power of the self, bond with transcendent reality, meaning of parent's life, meaning of the child's death and community/family membership. The spiritual realm cannot be separated from the physical, biological, social, and cognitive realms, and changes within the latter have impact on the spiritual. Thus, in order to study the spiritual life of the bereaved parents the social and material context must be taken into account.

## Methods

### *Study design and material*

This study is based on data collected by a web questionnaire designed for parents who have lost a child before birth. The questionnaire was posted during two years (27 March 2008 — 1 April 2010) on the Internet site of Swedish Infant Fund (Spädbarnsfonden). The fund is a member organization of Stillbirth International Alliance (ISA), a non-profit organization with the aim to promote infants' health and to help bereaved parents of stillborn babies. The questionnaire was open for any mother who wanted to answer, regardless of when the stillbirth had taken place. Information about the study was spread through the organization, Internet support groups, and announcements in the press. The Regional Ethics Committee in Lund, Sweden, had approved the study (reg. no. 467/2006).

The survey had in total 94 questions, but each person answered less, depending on individual circumstances. There were both multiple-choice alternatives and open questions where mothers were encouraged to describe their experiences. The questionnaire was administrated by a web company, which delivered data quarterly.

When closing the Internet site, 1034 mothers had answered the questionnaire. For this study one question from the survey has been used: *'Do you observe the anniversary of your child in any way? If so, how....'* One fourth had not yet had an anniversary, leaving 798 mothers. Fifteen per cent of them answered that they do not observe the anniversary; most of them gave birth more than 15 years ago. Eleven per cent answered that they observe the anniversary, but did not describe how, and were thus also excluded. Finally there were 596 mothers who said they observe the anniversary, had done so at least once, and in some way described what they do or did. The mothers were born between 1931 and 1988 ( $m=1968.9$ ;  $sd=10.0$ ; median 1971) and the stillbirths took place between 1956 and 2009 ( $m=1999.6$ ;  $sd=10.3$ ; median 2004). The stillbirths occurred between the 15<sup>th</sup> gestational week and the 43<sup>rd</sup> ( $m=34.3$ ;  $sd=7.4$ ; median 38). The open answers on the specific question used in this study range from one word to 193 words ( $m=17.1$ ;  $sd=17.6$ ; median 12). Quotations have been translated from Swedish by the authors, and names of stillborn have been changed to obtain anonymity. The study design does not allow any statistical generalization, for example how common certain practices are, since the mothers were self-recruited.

*Analysis*

The data have been evaluated by an analysis process made in several steps :

<b>1<sup>st</sup> step: coding code units</b>	107 code units
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> step: categorizing code units</b>	11 code categories (number of code units) thoughts (8), experiences and feelings (12), experiences and feelings (20), communication with the child (4), relations (9), activities at home (16), food and eating (15), activities outside home (10), publishing (3), competing activities (7), miscellaneous (3).
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> step: content analysis</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Activities (n=1281)</i></p> <p>visiting the grave (364), candle lightning (218), flowers (212), eating (153), thinking (58), speaking to others (52), giving present/toy (45), balloons (41), taking off from work (23), bubbles (19), excursions (16), looking at photos (14), announcements in newspaper (11), writing cards to child (10), siblings with same birthday (9), announcements on the Internet (7), speaking to child (7), spend time with living children (6), same day as national holidays (5), church visit (4), sky lantern (3), miscellaneous (4)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Persons involved (n=324)</i></p> <p>alone (29), with partner and/or children (264), with relatives and/or friends (31)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Place (n=436)</i></p> <p>at home (56), by the grave (248), other place (14), at home and by the grave (81), by the grave <i>and</i> other place (25), by the grave <i>and</i> newspaper/Internet (12)</p>
<b>4<sup>th</sup> step: super-ordinate categories (n=596)</b>	internal memorialization (62), home-based morialization (84), traditional grave visit (200), extended memorial rituals (188), alternative activities (40), coincidental activities (22)

*Figure 1. Analysis procedure.*

For the analysis a bricolage of methods were used, inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann (2008). At first the data were read through twice. It soon became clear that there was a great variance of memorialization practices. For some the anniversary passes with a thought; others make special activities the whole day. The first step in the coding procedure was made from a phenomenological perspective where the answers were separated into meaning units and coded, resulting in 107 codes. The second step was to find overarching categories by an inductively made analysis of the codes. Eleven categories emerged: thoughts, experiences and feelings, activities by the grave, communication with the child, relations, activities at home, food and eating, activities outside home, publishing, competing activities, miscellaneous.

Next step was to make a content analysis of each answer out of three questions: what activity was done, with whom, and where. For the activity analysis the categories were reduced to 22. When coding of persons involved, only answers where this was explicitly expressed were counted. In the category alone the answers had an «I», «my» or «mine». In the category with my partner/family also answers just mentioning «we» were included. The place was coded in four codes: at home, by the grave or the memorial site, other place, and newspaper/Internet. Since some mentioned two places, six categories of places emerged. Thereafter, a thorough analysis of the correspondence between activity, persons and place coding was made, resulting in six new super-ordinate categories into which the data were re-coded. The data were also coded independently by an external researcher, and then discussed, whereupon some adjustments were made.

The final categories were: internal memorialization (n=62, 10.4%), home-based memorialization (n=84, 14.1%), traditional grave visit (n=200, 33.6 %), extended memorial rituals (n=188, 31.5%), alternative activities (n=40, 6.7%), and coincidental activities (n=22, 3.7%). The first five categories should in part be interpreted as «expanding» in the sense that each higher category has additional activities, relations, and/or places in comparison to the former category. Those who make a traditional grave visit (category 3) might also light a candle at home (category 2), and those who have an alternative activity for example in an amusement park (category 5) might also make a grave visit (category 3). The categorization has been made according to the highest level of activity. The last category, coincidental activities, is of another kind, and includes memorialization characterized by another important event the same day, such as someone else's birthday or a national holiday.

## Results

### *The concept 'memory triggers'*

Gibson (2004) introduced the concept melancholy objects for objects that memorialize mourning. By drawing from Winnicott's concept of «transitional objects» helping children cope with parental separations, and Freud's view on melancholy, melancholy objects link the dead with the bereaved in different ways. However, a melancholy object not only mediates between the living and the dead, but also «signifies the

memory of mourning and as such it is the memorialized object of mourning» (Gibson 2004: 289). The result of this study indicates, though, the need for another concept related to memorialization since it not only relates to objects, but also to time, place and space. Francis et al. (2000) noted that for «most visitors, a trip to the cemetery acts as a catalyst to purposely think about and remember the deceased, to share with them family news, express feelings and concerns, and possibly ask for their guidance, help, advice and/or intercession» (2000: 43). In the same way as the cemetery, a whole range of phenomena such as cakes, material objects, birthday parties, and sensory experiences were found in this study to be catalysts, or triggers of memories. Thus, in this study the concept *memory trigger* is used for things, actions, contexts, persons, and places that help parents to recall, construct, and create memories of the stillborn. Memory triggers can be used both in a retrospective way for memories that surrounded the death, but also in a forward-looking way for an ongoing social incorporation of the stillborn in the family, where the future of the stillborn is created by memorial rituals. By the use of the concept memory trigger, memories are put into a social and physical context.

The result of this study shows that the bereaved mothers' anniversary observance can be separated into six different modes of memorialization: internal memorialization, home-based memorialization, traditional grave visit, extended memorial rituals, alternative activities, and coincidental activities. These categories differ regarding aspects on where and with whom the memorialization takes place, and what is done and with what kind of objects. The more elaborated the ritualization, the more memory triggers are used. Frequencies and background information for each group are shown in *Table 1*. Further analysis will be discussed later, after a presentation of the six categories.

**Table 1. Background information of participants within the six categories**

Category	Frequency	Per cent	Year of stillbirth (median)	Year of mother's birth (median)	Gestational week (median)
Internal memorialization	62	10.4	1986	1957	36
Home-based memorialization	84	14.1	1998	1966	35
Traditional grave visit	200	33.6	2004	1972	37
Extended memorial rituals	188	31.5	2004	1972	37
Alternative activities	40	6.7	2004	1971	39
Coincidental activities	22	3.7	2004	1965	37

### **Internal memorialization**

The first category is *Internal memorialization*. These are mothers who write that they think of their child, but they do not express any action nor do they share their thoughts with anyone else, as this mother: «Nothing special, more than dedicate the day to him. I will never forget that date.» It is a lonely, inner notification of the day: «That day is

holy for me. But I don't go around and say it to everybody. I can tell my husband and our children, but in my inner self it is holy for me,» another writes. Even if they do not observe it with any special activities, it is a different day compared to other days. Some even mention how the specific hour and minute play an important role. «I'm with him on the very minute when he was born,» one mother writes, and another reports «Many times I have withdrawn from the job, into the toilet just on 11.02 AM when she was born.»

Thoughts of how it could have been if the child had lived might come; but mothers in this category seem to keep these thoughts within themselves: «I hope the day passes quickly. I don't want to talk about her, but think a lot of her. Why? Wonder how it would have been». Some express feelings of sadness during that day: «Have the thoughts for myself, I don't really want to do anything funny that day, just be with myself». It is not clear if these mothers do not want or if they want but find it hard to share their grief with someone else.

### **Home-based memorialization**

In the next category, *Home-based memorialization*, mothers observe the day in their home, mainly by lighting candles and talking about the child, as described by one mother: «Light his candle and have a memorial for him the whole day, listening to music I associate with him». Most of these mothers do not hold their grief and memorial ritualization for themselves, but share it with their partner and children if they have any. Some mothers point out the importance of telling the siblings about the birthday of the child, and how old the child would have been if it had lived: «I say that today Daniel would have had his birthday, write a heart in the calendar» and «We light a candle by his porcelain angel that I have; the children take part, which I think is good, because I don't want him to be forgotten». One important function in this kind of memorialization seems to be confirming the child's existence for the rest of the family.

Another activity at home is looking at the hospital records and photos. One mother buys a new angel each year for the memorial spot she has for the child. Some parents donate money for special funds.

### **Traditional grave visit**

The third group is the largest, and they act according to traditions as they visit the cemetery. Half of the stillborn in the study have a grave of their own or a family grave. One third have been put in a memorial grove, with the specific place of the ashes being unknown for the next-of-kin and a shared decoration site for flowers and candles. Many mention bringing candles and flowers, while some emphasize having specific flowers: one white flower for each year, or one pink rose, and others have special flower decorations made: a heart of yellow tulips or of roses, or they make them by themselves.

There are also quite a few mothers who buy toys, teddies or other gifts for the child. In Sweden there is no tradition of bringing grave decorations other than flowers and candles; however, during the last two decades a wider variety has come into use, espe-



cially on children's graves (Gustavsson 2003). While toys and teddies cannot be seen as traditional, the activities by the grave are rather traditional in these cases.

Some go alone, as the mother who writes: «Flowers on the grave and a little chat between the gal and me,» while others stress the whole family's participation: «The whole family goes, and we light candles, put some flowers, and when we get a hold on red heart shaped grave candles, we use them. Then we take some pictures.» Siblings may have special tasks: «my children sing a song for him» or «our girls put drawings and other small things».

The cemetery is in itself a strong memory trigger, as a common space for death. It is generally loaded with symbolic meanings of memorialization, even if memories and emotions are emphasized for bereaved persons visiting a specific grave. The grave visit is a memory trigger connected with place, but also with things and with separating specific time for memorialization.

### **Extended memorial rituals**

Apart from the stories of traditional grave visits there are quite a few examples of more complex customs, which have been gathered in the category *Extended Memorial Rituals*. These differ from the traditional grave visits by also including new elements such as a ritual of blowing bubbles and releasing balloons. Another kind of extended memorial ritual concerns food and eating, and includes stories about eating, celebrating, or having a birthday party.

*Bubble and Balloon Rituals.* The customs of blowing bubbles and releasing balloons are new rituals not commonly known in Sweden. However, among the bereaved parents, this seems to be an acknowledged ritual; more than 40 persons in the material mention blowing bubbles or/and releasing balloons. The origin of the rite is not clear, but balloon-releasing rituals are used by some bereavement groups (Klass 1999; Rolls 2009), and balloons have been noticed in other studies of bereaved parents' ritualization (Grout and Romanoff 2000; Layne 2003). The symbolic thoughts behind the ritual may be dual: the bubbles lifting toward the sky are links to the child, at the same time as they represent something children usually do, and that the parents now have to do instead as a symbolic action.

There are several short stories about balloons. Balloons are interpreted in different ways, and carry different symbolic meanings. The balloons may be connected with the specific age: «Release an annual balloon, light annual candles and sing». The word *annual* should probably be understood as a balloon with the age printed on or as many balloons as the child would have been. Or they might come as a special gift with a special shape or special colour. Others release one balloon from each family member, or send greetings and drawings from the siblings with the balloons. Not everyone releases the balloons; some put them on the grave or in a tree nearby. One mother does not mention any grave visit, but describes a ceremony at home: «I and my husband stand on the balcony, light her candle, and blow bubbles, and see them rise towards heaven.»

*Food.* One fourth of all mothers mention food in some way. The rate is even higher among the mothers who have lost a baby during the last ten years. Whether it is eating

by the grave, eating at home, inviting friends for coffee, or going to a restaurant it is apparent that sharing food is a very strong symbolic action of coping with the grief on anniversary days. According to Davies (1997) food is a way of speaking «words against death», as food is strengthening and necessary for life.

To eat by the grave is not a traditional Swedish custom, but there are several families who bring food to the grave. It is like a birthday party by the grave. The word (birthday) party [Swedish: kalas] is also used by several mothers for describing how they observe the anniversary. The use of the word signalizes emotions of joy. It is the birth that is celebrated, rather than a sole solemn observance of death. Connected with a party is a cake, which usually is mentioned together with the «party». These stories are often longer and more detailed.

We buy a cake, balloons, bubbles, flowers and presents. We wrap them up and go to the grave. We sit on a picnic rug by the grave, eat the cake, open the presents, blow bubbles, release balloons, put flowers in the vase, remember, cry, and decorate the grave.

Buy the same flowers that we had on the funeral. A little present. Have a little picnic with the family by the grave. Decorate with flowers, balloon, light candles and blow bubbles.

Some eat by the grave, but more common is to eat at home or at a restaurant. One mother describes how they decorate a nice breakfast table, and eat breakfast before going to the cemetery. A couple of mothers relate the memorialization meal with holidays taking place at the same time, combining the two events.

Food is also loaded by the mothers with special symbolic meanings. One mother writes: «We bake the special cake that I was baking when the labour pains started. That cake is nowadays called the Maria cake». Another mother serves waffles, «because they look like hearts». Certain food places might be connected with the stillborn child, as the ice cream place that one family nowadays call «John's place», since they went there after their son John's funeral. Now, they go there on the anniversaries.

These special cakes and ice cream not only «speak words against death», they are also typical memory triggers, linking the retrospective with the future, livening up smells and tastes from the time of the loss with the present.

*Creating family identity.* One part of the anniversary celebration clearly relates to an ambition to connect the siblings to each other. Many of the rituals mentioned above can be viewed in this perspective: siblings singing, blowing bubbles, and having birthday cakes. One mother expressively states it as a purpose for the day: «We visit the grave, eat a nice dinner and have a cake. Just as an ordinary birthday, but in black. We try to remember what there is to be remembered. The other children should also have a feeling of togetherness.» Another writes: «Put flowers and candles on the grave. Arrange a cake at home. We want to confirm that she truly has lived, and because we want to make her more 'real' for the siblings.» Another way to increase the links between the siblings is to let them give each other gifts, as one family does.

Siblings might also take part in deciding the activity. One family had a cake by the grave as the older brother wished, while another mother describes the observance directed by the sibling in a difficult to handle way:

Our children have always been particular that David's birthday should be celebrated as all other children's birthdays: 'Otherwise he will be sad in heaven'. He even gets a birthday present and a song: «he will live to be one hundred years» [part of the Swedish Birthday song, authors' explanation]. I have to admit that it was really heavy to sing the first year.

While some mothers report that their anniversary observance has been reduced with time and other children being born, others write about increased activities on the anniversaries after the birth of new children: «Now when we have a daughter, we celebrate her big brother's birthday with cake, and send up balloons to the sky and blow bubbles.»

### **Alternative activities**

Apart from arranging a kind of birthday party, there is another group who organize many activities during the anniversary day. They take time off from work and make the day special by doing an alternative activity. Often a visit to the grave site is included in the day's activities, but equally – or more – important is another activity. One mother writes that for many years she participated in the preschool (day care) and the school day on that specific day with her other children. She wanted to be together with children. Several families take time off from work to go to an amusement park or a zoo. As one mother says, they «honour her memory by being together and have fun with the family». Others mention more general family activities such as «do something funny, exciting, together», or «make a wonderful excursion; just the family». One family who's stillborn died before Christmas decorates the Christmas tree and the house on that day, because, «it is something the siblings have decided». Afterward they have a cake.

### **Coincidental activities**

Death can, of course, occur on any day during a year, and for some mothers the stillbirth happened on a day connected with another important event, be it for personal or for cultural reasons. Some mothers express tensions or mixed feelings caused by coincidental events on the anniversary date, while others in a more positive way have merged the celebrations. Though statistically their share is low (3.6%), it is of great importance for these 22 mothers. For some, the concurrence of the day has an effect on the memorialization of the child, while for others the celebration of the other feast has changed. One mother no longer lights the first candle on Advent, which is a strong Swedish tradition – one candle is lit on each of the Sundays before Christmas. Another mother no longer dances around the Midsummer Pole, which is another strong Swedish tradition.

A few of the stillborn babies had twin siblings that survived; others have siblings born another year, but on the same day. The experiences of the day differ among the mothers. For one it is traumatic:

I had the bad luck of getting my second child on exactly the same day, one year after. So that day always starts with us all going to the grave and put a large, beautiful bouquet of flowers. But the rest of the day is (must be) marked by joy, for the sake of my other son. We often go to an amuse-

ment park or a zoo. I often put an 'In Memoriam' announcement in the newspaper. And the same day we have a Congratulation announcement for the other son. Sometimes they are on the very same page and it is totally sick that it could be so. How could it be the same day? This year it is ten years since he died, and I will write a really long and emotional poem for the 'In Memoriam'. Then I have decided that it is enough, ten years must be enough. We can never hold the younger son's birthday party with his friends on this day. His party is usually a couple of days later.

The two events on the same date are causing complicated, competing, and contradictory emotions for this mother. It is a conflict of feelings, of joy and sorrow, of how to deal with the day. What to do and not to do.

However, another mother with the very same experience of giving birth to a new child on the same date interpreted the situation in a totally different manner. She describes her thoughts: «I gave birth to a daughter on the very same date two years after. I always think of it as his soul came back in her. I think it is very strange that it is the same day of birth.» Yet another mother writes: «Later I adopted a child who happened to have approximately the same time of birth. That was a good feeling!»

These two mothers converted the memories in a new positive way. They «solved» the coincidental happenings with a kind of transformation instead of looking at them as a competition. The same power of transformation becomes clear for the following couple: «We have only had one anniversary and then we got married, partly to honour the memory, but also in order to turn the day into something positive.»

### *Statistical differences between the groups*

Since data were drawn from a large questionnaire, the different groups could be compared with other variables. For these comparisons data from category 6, *Coincidental activities* were removed because of its focus on feelings and its mixed content regarding memorialization activities. It might not be a surprise that there was a strong correlation ( $p=.000$ ) between the year when the stillbirth occurred and the kind of ritualization, with a strong overweight for an extended memorialization among those who had a stillbirth during the last 10 years (*Table 2*). For example, among the mothers with a stillbirth after 1999, 40.3 per cent had an extended memorialization, while the share was only 19.3 per cent among those who lost a child 1990–1999. Yet, we do not know if it is time that changes the ways of memorialization, or if the differences are due to new ways of memorialization emerging during the last fifteen to twenty years (Gustavsson 2003).

**Table 2. Memorialization and the year of stillbirth, per cent (N=514)**

Year of stillbirth				
Category	Before 1980 n=33	1980-1989 n=38	1990-1999 n=88	2000-2010 n=382
Internal memorialization	57.6	39.5	11.4	3.7
Home-based memorialization	24.2	23.7	28.4	9.2
Traditional grave visit	18.2	23.7	31.8	39.0
Extended memorial rituals	0	10.5	19.3	40.3
Alternative activities	0	2.6	9.1	7.9
TOTAL	100	100	100	100.1

Pearson Chi-square 177.136; df 12; p=.000

Regarding the gestational week, a significant correlation (p=.018; n=571) was first found when all cases were included (Table 3). However, the correlation disappeared (p=.336; n=518) when data before the 22<sup>nd</sup> week were excluded. This suggests that mothers from that gestational age apprehend the fetus in a similar manner as in a full term pregnancy.

**Table 3. Memorialization and gestational week, per cent (N=571)**

Gestational week				
Category	Before 22 n=53	22-27 n=73	28-36 n=129	37-43 n=316
Internal memorialization	18.9	12.3	10.1	8.9
Home-based memorialization	24.5	21.9	13.2	11.7
Traditional grave visit	39.6	32.9	34.9	34.8
Extended memorial rituals	15.1	28.8	32.6	37.0
Alternative activities	1.9	4.1	9.3	7.6
TOTAL	100	100	101	100

All gestational weeks: Pearsons Chi-Square 24.398; df 12; p=.018

Only Week 22-43: Pearsons Chi-Square 8.504; df=8; p=.386

Another variable that could affect the memorialization is the existence of other children. In everyday conversations one can hear comments that when bereaved parents have other children, they will forget the stillborn. The result does not support this statement. The extended memorial rituals are significantly (p=.008) predominant among mothers with living children (Table 4).

**Table 4. Memorialization and having living children, per cent (N=574)**

Living children		
Category	No n=67	Yes n=507
Internal memorialization	11.9	10.8
Home-based memorialization	9.0	14.6
Traditional grave visit	52.2	34.8
Extended memorial rituals	17.9	32.8
Alternative activities	9	7.0
TOTAL	100	100

Pearsons Chi-Square 13.882; df=4; p=.008

## Discussion and summary

Unlike other bereaved persons who have lived for years together with the deceased, parents of stillborn babies have few shared moments, and especially no experience of celebration together. An anniversary has a unique position for these parents, as a day of both birth and death. This study has shown how bereaved parents of stillborn use different kinds of memory triggers on anniversaries: time, place and space, general memorial objects (candles and flowers), and specific objects connected with the child. There is a great variety among the parents: from the lonesome, individual mourning to the socially inclusive and ritually developed memorialization. The wide spectrum of memorialization practices were grouped into six categories.

While parents in the category, *Internal memorialization*, only use – or are affected by – one single memory trigger, time; parents in the other categories make use of several others. In the category, *Home-based memorialization*, objects such as candles, photos, and diaries are utilized, and the ritualization is often shared with the partner and possible children. In the category, *Visit the Grave*, the cemetery or burial ground as a special memory place is central as it is closely related to death and the dead. But the visit also includes things brought to the grave that serve as memory triggers: candles and flowers, often with a specific symbolic meaning. In the category, *Extended Memorial Rituals*, memory triggers are numerous, as the ritualization often contains many elements: bubbles, balloons, songs, food, cakes, gifts, and a get-together with relatives and friends. The child is brought into large social sphere. In the category *Alternative Activities*, the anniversary is transformed into a positive family day, uniting and strengthening the family by fun activities, while in the category *Coincidental activities* observance of the anniversary is affected by other birthdays or holidays taking place on the same day. Some mothers find this disturbing while others handle and interpret the simultaneity in a positive way.

Memory triggers serve as links between the parents and the child, facilitating the continuing bonds. Parents detach from their usual daily routine, and use memory trig-

gers to maintain a social connection and communication with the child. In addition, a social recognition of the child is established, and the child could be presented for other family members, relatives and friends through the rituals. For the majority of mothers in this study, the date of the child's birth and death is an important memory trigger they can neither forget nor want to neglect. Some parents even mention how the specific hour and minute play an important role. The time spent on observance varies, for some it is a brief moment of recognizing that a family member is dead, for others, the whole day is set apart for memorialization. Some make it into a family activity day, while those who have no other children take time off from work and make it a special day with visits to the grave, picnics in the countryside, and restaurant visits. By combining traditional memorial activities such as grave visits, with entertainment activities, the anniversary is emotionally transformed into a positive day at the same time that the stillborn is honoured.

The cemetery and the grave are key memory triggers of place, but equally important are things brought to the grave such as candles, flowers, letters and gifts. For an outsider, flowers may not appear to be personal, but for the mothers the flowers represent certain aspects of the parent-child relations. By attaching symbolic meanings to flowers, the child is memorized in a specific social context.

Food is another important memory trigger, both reminding the parents of the day of childbirth, but also forward looking. A birthday cake and a birthday party make two important statements. First, that this is a celebration of birth and not a lament of death; second, that the child has a social life within the family. He or she might be biologically dead, but definitely not socially. By celebrating a birthday party, memories that should have been there – or at least are wished for – are created. The cake and the party are memory triggers with performative roles in making memories come true.

Furthermore, the results from the study show no significant differences in memorialization from the 22<sup>nd</sup> gestational week. This suggests that the fetus from that age is apprehended by the mothers in a similar manner as in a full term pregnancy. The main differences are due to what period of time the stillbirth took place. The closer in time, the more elaborated the memorialization, though many of the mothers who had a stillbirth more than 20 years ago still observe the anniversary. One third of the mothers who had experienced a stillbirth before 1980 have a memorialization at home or by the grave, and six out of ten of those from the period 1980–1989. The extended memorial rituals are more common among those with living children than without, indicating that memorialization is a social activity aiming at family bonding, and emphasizing relations not only in history, but also in the future.

## Conclusions

This study elucidates the different ways in which parents observe the anniversaries of their stillborn. The result illustrates the great variance of observance activities, using a wide range of memory triggers, helping them not only to connect with the child and with the situation of loss, but also to shape and strengthening the family identity. For-

merly made studies have focused on stress and anxiety on anniversaries (Capitulo 2004; Chow 2010; Dyregrov and Dyregrov 1999; Ribner 1998), while the result from this study show that bereaved parents also can use activities connected with feelings of joy, such as birthday parties, picnics, amusement park visits to cope with the anniversary. For some mothers, anniversaries are important days for many years and decades. The findings indicate the importance of openness toward memorialization practices among health professionals, not only after late stillbirths occur but also earlier ones. Helping parents to collect mementoes and to take photographs are important tasks for health professionals, especially at the delivery wards, in order to facilitate future ritualization. Even though this study has pointed out a positive aspect on memorial ritualization, it is not possible to give a specific advice to parents as a result from the study, and memorialization must be an individual choice made by the bereaved.

Further research based on field observations and in-depth interviews would deepen the understanding of anniversary practices and experiences of the bereaved mothers. In order to investigate how the vivid ritualization among the mothers who have lost a stillborn during the last ten years will develop in a longer perspective, over-time studies are needed.

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