How we grieve, how we remember

By ROBERT W. SNYDER

FIVE YEARS AFTER the destruction of the World Trade Center, there may not be a permanent memorial at Ground Zero, but there is a flowering of Sept. 11 memorials in the metropolitan area. The contrast reminds us of the spontaneous initiative that got us through the attacks, the fragmentation that is an enduring part of American culture and the unsettled place of Sept. 11 in our memories.

Some of our earliest memorials were homemade fliers from people searching for survivors; as hope for their safe return faded, they commemorated lost lives. Equally evocative were the flowers piled at firehouses in New York City and the circles of candles at parks and intersections throughout our region.

These early acts of remembrance expressed something Americans have become very good at: mourning individuals who died in large disasters. At the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C., or in AIDS quilts, we have balanced personal loss and public grief in ways that put the individual closest to us in the foreground.

There is a painful logic to this. When losses are so great as to become abstract, the safest way to ensure that the people we knew are remembered is to recall them one at a time. And each of us wants to have a direct role in the remembering. Think of all the visitors to the Vietnam War memorial whose visit is incomplete until they reach out and touch the familiar name or leave a memento.

The first permanent Sept. 11 memorials followed in this tradition. They didn't seek to mark the loss of everyone killed in the attacks. Instead, they emphasized the deaths of people close to the mourners. In this way, residents of a town or county, or members of a fire department or police department, commemorated their losses.

The World Trade Center site is already ringed by such memorials: one to fallen firefighters at the firehouse of Ladder Co. 10 and Engine Co. 10 on Liberty Street in Manhattan, others across the Hudson to the dead of Hoboken and Jersey City, and another on the north shore of Staten Island to the dead of that borough.

Such memorials signal our desire to recall individuals.

They are also evidence of a tendency toward fragmentation in American culture.

Long before the attacks of Sept. 11, Americans were distinguished by our eagerness to hunker down with people who share our ideas, identities and consumer preferences. From segregated housing patterns to cable television shows aimed at narrow slices of the public to advertisements that exhort us to "have it your way," we are most comfortable with people just like ourselves. And we are ill at ease with the negotiations, compromises and ambiguities that suffice any attempt to produce something as embracing as a public site of remembrance.

The political and economic wrangling around construction in lower Manhattan was bound to be bitter, but when you stir in our differences over who and what to remember, and how and why, the mix is volatile. It was one thing for individuals to write and post fliers to lost children, spouses, friends and lovers. It was another to delegate the task of commemorating the deaths of thousands to people who don't necessarily share your own passions, losses, experiences and understandings of Sept. 11.

I'll write my own brother's epitaph, we seem to say, but I won't let you write one for him.

We also wrestle awkwardly with the purpose of a Ground Zero memorial. Is it to mourn the dead? Honor heroes? Inspire us in future struggles? Tell the story of the day? Put specific faces on events? There is merit in each of these, but any memorial that tries to do all of them runs the risk of becoming incoherent. At the same time, any memorial that stresses one way of remembering over others is bound to rankle someone.

Many would like a memorial at Ground Zero to resurrect the brave sense of unity that surged through the metropolitan area after Sept. 11, 2001. I cherish the memory of that mood. I ran for my life from the collapse of the south tower, helped a man I found in the smoke, and was pulled to safety by food court workers.

But that unity, born in a moment of crisis, just can't be sustained in more normal times. Fragmentation is the natural condition of contemporary American culture.

As Sept. 11 recedes into the past, our memories and understandings of the day are shaped by new questions. The Vietnam memorial, for all the debates that surrounded it, was erected after the war was over. Today, we are trying to build a Sept. 11 memorial in the middle of the controversial conflict that the terrorist attacks spawned.

And then there is the war in Iraq. To some Americans, Ground Zero is the first battlefield in a war that continues in Baghdad. To others, myself included, the war in Iraq is an utterly mistaken response to Sept. 11 that diverts us from our very necessary fight against al-Qaida and its allies.

Given these differences, the only certainty about the future is that there will be many different lessons drawn from Sept. 11. For me, the best memorials make room for that. They encourage me to think about that terrible day without telling me just what to think. And one that does that very well is "The Staten Island September 11 Memorial."

Its two white walls, their interiors engraved with the names, birthdates, occupations and profiles of the dead, look out across the harbor and summon up what I want to remember most from Sept. 11.

In the massed names I see the enormity of the day's losses; in the names of the firefighters I am reminded of ordinary people's courage; and in the skyline I see the resilience of my native city.