

# Deathscapes in Finnish funerals during Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted and reshaped experiences of bodily disposal and memorialization around the world. One key characteristic of almost all religious practices and traditions is the centrality of face-to-face gatherings (Baker *et al.* 2020). The spatial turn shows the need to study space and place in research on religion (Knott 2010). Avril Maddrell has utilized a spatial lens for death studies with her concept of the deathscape, by which she means both the places associated with death and the dead and how these are infused with meaning (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010). The aim of my article is to uncover which spaces were used in Finnish funerals and what they reveal about deathscapes during Covid-19. The forty-five pieces of correspondence that form the qualitative data of the research were received between October 2020 and February 2021; they offer some important, real-time insights into how funeral spaces and burial places were experienced during the two first waves of the pandemic. The findings reveal that participation in the ritual was more important than the actual site of the funeral, burial or memorial. The findings indicate that deathscapes in Finnish funerals during Covid-19 typically dealt with how ritual space was created during restrictions. The physical site was important as long as it created ritual space and was aligned with the personality of the deceased. Central to these actively created spaces was that they followed the deceased body either physically, virtually or spiritually. The latter was a conceptual finding from the data and a means by which the writers pointed to spatialities of belief and virtual attendance that were not digitally mediated.

## Introduction

Finland is one of the countries which have managed to keep the number of infections relatively limited. For example, during the first two waves of Covid-19, during which this study was conducted, the number of people who died from the virus was less than 1,000. Nevertheless, the impact of the pandemic on face-to-face gatherings such as funerals was enormous. The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted and radically reshaped experiences of bodily disposal and memorialization around the world. One key characteristic of almost all religious practices and traditions is the centrality of face-to-face gatherings (Baker *et al.* 2020). The intensification of restrictions on the number of people allowed to attend a funeral was stark (from fifty people to ten only), and the restrictions were interpreted in a variety of ways. In some Lutheran parishes, even the pastor and cantor were included among the maximum of ten people, while in others only the relatives and friends of the deceased were counted. This resulted in the National Association of Funeral Directors asking the Office of the Church Council and Regional State Administrative Agency to provide a clear set of instructions on how to conduct funerals so that these could be observed impartially

among funeral attendees during the Covid-19 pandemic (Seppälä 2021).

To provide vital context, the membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCF) is shrinking: in 2020, 68.6 per cent of Finns were members (membership statistics, ELCF 2020). Even with this shrinking membership, the ELCF is the most important actor when dealing with funerals in Finland. This reflects the comparatively greater role of Lutheran pastors *vis-à-vis* clergymen in other countries, where the role of funeral agencies as organizers of the ritual is central (Schäfer 2007). The role of funeral agencies in performing the ritual is, however, also increasing in Finland (Pajari 2014a; Høeg and Pajari 2013). In Finland, the burial following Lutheran traditions is important for many, even for those who are members of the civil registry (Butters 2017). Similarly, as in the other Nordic countries, the Lutheran majority church remains responsible for the maintenance of cemeteries (Sohlberg and Ketola 2016; Høeg and Pajari 2013; Walter 2005). Cremation has increased during recent years: 30,200 cremations and 21,600 burials were performed in 2020 (statistics of activities, ELCF 2020). As such, there is a trend in Finland for public funerals to be replaced by private mourning, and the number of people attending funerals is also decreasing (Pajari 2014a, 2018).

In normal situations, physical attendance is central to funeral and memorial rituals. During the Covid-19 pandemic, restrictions on attendance were strict, which reshaped the spatial understanding with regard to funeral and memorial services. Accordingly, the spatial turn shows the centrality of the study of space and place in regard to research on religion (Knott 2010). Space is understood to include physical, social and mental dimensions (*ibid.*). Avril Maddrell has utilized the spatial

lens in death studies with her concept of the deathscape, by which she understands both the places associated with death and the dead and how these are infused with meaning (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010). Death and bereavement are intensified at certain sites, which are often simultaneously public and private (*ibid.*; Lowe *et al.* 2020). Maddrell's deathscape does not, however, deal only with the physical places where death is performed but acknowledges the significance of social (Francis *et al.* 2005) and ritual space (Grainger 2006; Davies 2017). Maddrell refers to Henry Lefebvre's theory on social space, according to which a space is not merely a defined measurable unit, but also lived space (Lefebvre 1991; Maddrell 2016). Ritual space is embodied and performative, and represents an overlap between the material space of the body and emotional-psychological space (Maddrell 2010, 2016, 2020). Deathscapes, therefore, can be found in the intersection of the co-producing spheres of physical, corporeal body-mind and virtual spaces and practices (Maddrell and Mathijssen 2022). According to Maddrell (2016), virtual arenas incorporate digital worlds, virtual communities and the spatialities of belief, which I call 'spiritual spaces' in this study because they deal with those rituals in which people participated at a distance without digital connection. These various dimensions of space and how they are perceived are essential when studying funerals during Covid-19.

Previous research on funerals during Covid-19 is sparse. In the Finnish context, there is only one publication, which stems from the same data (Vähäkangas 2021), which investigated the emotions of those organizing and attending funerals during the pandemic. A Swedish study conducted in 2020 interviewed nine bereaved people during the restrictions and focused on

emotions in final farewells during end-of-life care, not during funerals (Wasshede and Björk 2021). Likewise, a German study examined the content and emotions surrounding restrictions on touching the deceased person's body (Stetter 2020). A British study investigated memorialization and its challenges during Covid-19 (Lowe *et al.* 2020) but did not focus on spatial aspects. An American study discusses Covid-19-related deaths and mourning of loved ones online (Myers and Donley 2022). The present study does not, however, deal with Covid-19-related deaths but deaths more generally during the pandemic. Maddrell (2020) has written on bereavement during Covid-19 from the spatial point of view, but her focus is on grief and consolation, not on funerals and memorials, as in this study. Another British study that analyses deathscapes during Covid-19 focuses on digitally mediated funerals (Alexis-Martin 2020). The conclusion is that mediated funerals cannot replace traditional physical funeral practices. There is thus a need to study funerals, which were disrupted owing to concerns of disease transmission, during the pandemic. This article aims to find out which spaces were used in Finnish funerals and what they reveal about deathscapes during Covid-19.

### **Data, method and research ethics**

I chose personal letters as a method for writers to report on their experiences without worrying about being exposed to the virus, and so that they could have ample time to perform the task. An invitation to participate in the research was published in Finnish in newspapers and social media and shared via various grief organizations. Most of the letters deal with two or more funerals. The call to participate in the research included the

following instructions: What emotions did attending/not being able to attend a funeral awake in you? Was it difficult to decide whether to participate or not? How did the pandemic influence the organization of and participation in the funeral? How did the relationship to the deceased influence your experience? Anyone responsible for planning the funeral was also asked to answer the following: In what ways did the wishes of others participating in planning influence the mode of the funeral ritual/space of the ritual/burial place?

The data consist of forty-five letters of 35–79-year-old Finns. The writers are from various parts of Finland, mostly female (thirty-three), with only twelve writers being male. All writers are Finnish- or Swedish-speaking Finns, which means that the call did not reach minority ethnic groups. The letters were received between October 2020 and February 2021, and they include experiences during both the first and second waves of Covid-19. Most participants sent their letter via email and some via mail; one participant sent a recording from a radio interview on the topic. Letters were from half a page to seven pages long. Many included as attachments the programme of the funeral and/or memorial service as well as pictures; some also included the obituary. Most of the writers were relatives of the deceased: widows/widowers, children and grandchildren; among the participants were also some friends of the deceased. Most of the writers belonged to the ELCF, one to the Finnish Orthodox Church, one to a Baptist Church in Finland, and four to the civil registry. In this article, I refer to the letters as sources of data: for example, L8 refers to the eighth letter I received. Additionally, I reveal the age of the writer and his/her relationship to the deceased. The direct quotations from the letter data are translated by me.

People participated voluntarily in this study. I did not ask their names, only their age, gender, relationship to the deceased and religious affiliation (or lack thereof). I did not ask their address, but many letters include at least the location of the funeral. In order to safeguard the anonymity of the authors, I do not report these actual places. I have also deleted personal names from the letters. I followed ethical procedures during data gathering and the data is securely stored.

### **Thematic analysis and the structure of the article**

I conducted thematic analysis (Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013) in the old-fashioned way, labeling the printed letters with marker pens and adding comments in the margins. Thematic analyses are especially useful when seeking to combine analysis of meaning with context (Joffe and Yardley 2004). Therefore, I read the letters carefully and sought to understand the context of the funerals. With the first reading, I focused on experiences connected to the physical place, but during the following readings I noticed that experiences regarding gender and body were also linked to the discussion on space, which led to me marking these in the data as well.

Finally, I compiled the findings into a table, which consists of both background data and the themes identified in the analyses. Background data include age, gender, religious/non-religious affiliation, relationship to the deceased, and information on restrictions during the funeral. The aim of the table is to increase understanding of the entirety of the data. The table includes information by which an individual writer might be identified, and for this reason it is not attached here.

Three main themes were identified through thematic analysis: spaces to follow

the body, alternative funeral spaces and creative memorial spaces. The memorialization practices connected with the preparation of the body, funeral, burial and memorial rituals during Covid-19 will be discussed following the chronological order of the funeral process.

### **Spaces to follow the body**

Preparing and viewing the body are considered focal points for memorialization, and both of these were restricted for fear of spreading the virus. Preparing the body for the coffin is often done by the funeral agency, but under normal circumstances the bereaved can take part. Viewing the body is usually organized on the premises of an ELCF site, but during the Covid-19 pandemic this was not allowed at all. Moreover, escorting the deceased to the chapel has been an important tradition, especially in the Finnish countryside, where the deceased person's home and the burial place are typically situated close to each other (Pajari 2014b). Likewise, viewing of the body seems to be more widely practised in the countryside than in cities.

Many of the writers explain the restrictions on viewing the body and describe various ways in which the bereaved could view preparation of the body remotely. A funeral director wrote how they had tried to render the process of preparing and escorting the body during the restrictions visible:

Our agency started utilizing photographs. We documented the whole journey of the deceased from hospital to the chapel ... We noticed that it was even more important for some of the bereaved to insert a teddy, pictures or other personal memorial items into the coffin instead of in-person farewells. (L9, w38)

The family could not take part in preparing the body or placing memorial items in the coffin, but this funeral director had decided to document the whole process in such a way that the bereaved could at least follow the last journey. This procedure helped them to observe the process, albeit without being able to take part in it physically.

The restrictions surrounding the death rituals of preparing and viewing the body of their loved one were difficult for many participants. A bereaved mother writes how difficult it was to view the body of her daughter:

Before the burial we still wanted to view the body so that we – all the closest could say their farewells. It was not possible in the hospital chapel because that was under renovation and the parish chapels did not organize viewings because of the corona virus. The body had to be transported to another hospital chapel so that we could see her before the funeral and cremation. (L12, w61)

The narrative from this mother shows that in those cases where the bereaved really wanted to view the body, they were indeed able to find a place despite the restrictions, albeit with increased effort. She was very happy that the funeral agency helped her to find a place for the viewing but very critical towards the parish, whose restrictions she did not completely understand.

Some of the participants described how they had mobilized the tradition of escorting the body for a wider community to take part in the funeral, despite the restrictions. The body of the deceased is the centre of action, and it seems that deathscapes are often organized from the

locus of the body. A widow describes the procession of her deceased husband via a Christian college where the couple used to teach. She writes:

During the procession we stopped at the college where we lived for twenty-two years. The children grew up there and many of our memories are connected with that college. Some of our old colleagues and friends came to the gate to honour my husband. It meant a lot to me. (L38, w74)

This college played a significant part in the life story of this couple, and visiting it during the funeral proceedings was meaningful to both the widow who wrote about the trip and those who came to the gate to honour the deceased. The burial service was attended by the close family only, but this procession ritual made it possible for a wider community to participate in the funeral over all. The widow emphasized how meaningful it was for her that others could participate in mourning. The spaces which were a part of the life history of the deceased were included in his deathscape during this stop-over at the college.

Some of the writers stressed the importance of following the body from the hospital to the chapel. Covid-19 restrictions made it harder, but some escorted the body, as the following 79-year-old widow explains:

My aim was to go to fetch my beloved husband from the hospital but because there had been many corona infections I did not dare to go there. We asked the funeral agency to drive via his beloved farm when escorting him to the chapel. ... This arrangement was accepted. I was with the children receiving the coffin and

had a silent moment with him and took photographs. ... In the chapel we asked if they could open the coffin so that we could see our beloved one for the last time. They first refused. ... The person from the funeral agency talked with the sexton, after which our wish was accepted. Viewing the body was very important for us and it felt comforting. We could recognize him as our own and could see his calm face. This helped to give him away sorrowfully but calmly. (L40, w76)

The widow shared how her husband had died unexpectedly, and she wanted to have a traditional procession of the body in spite of the restrictions. It was not possible to join the procession from the hospital but at least the deceased was transported via his home farm. The widow and her children received the body of their beloved outside the chapel and finally could also view his body in the chapel. Her words reflect how important it was to see the body and to recognize that it really was their beloved husband/father. This whole process was meaningful for her and eased the grief.

In spite of the restrictions, many of the writers had the chance to escort the body of their loved one, one way or another. Various spaces, such as the hospital chapel or escorting of the body outdoors, were described by the bereaved as those in which they could follow the body during Covid-19. Additionally, the data reveal that some funeral agencies started photographing body preparations so that the deceased could follow the body all through the funeral process despite the strict restrictions. Experiences of body viewing and escorting the body of the deceased during Covid-19 are a reminder of how embodiment is a central part of death-

scapes (Maddrell 2016). When following the body, death is concretely viewed in spatial terms, as the deceased has crossed over to the other side and only their dead body is still visible.

### **Alternative funeral spaces**

Most of the funeral services in this study were conducted in a cemetery chapel or church, as is the tradition in Finland. Additionally, many letters include discussions of funeral services outdoors at cemeteries, which were previously a tradition in many parts of the country (Pajari 2014b). This section first discusses the physical places and then analyses their meaning for the bereaved.

Restrictions changed rapidly and, according to one letter, the information regarding new restrictions was disseminated only two hours prior to the funeral service. The new restrictions meant that only half of those invited could attend. This burial was conducted in the hospital chapel; the hospital chaplain reorganized it so that he had two similar burial services, one after the other, so that all those invited could attend (L15, w37). The same space was used twice, which made it possible for everybody to attend. This letter does not include discussion on the physical site; the possibility of using the same space twice was more important in this account of the deathscape during the pandemic.

In numerous cases, the whole burial ritual was organized outdoors at the graveyard, which made it easier to maintain distance from other participants. Relevantly, during the two first waves, there was an understanding that the virus would not spread as easily outside. This resulted in less strict restrictions for funerals conducted outdoors. A friend writes:

The burial ritual was organized at the graveyard. Fortunately, it was a beautiful summer's day. It reminded me of my childhood when all burial services were held outside. The ritual at the graveyard was beautiful. The couple belonged to the ELCF and were strong in their faith. We knew the pastor and the cantor from our home parish and the speech and music suited the personality of the deceased. The idea of reuniting in eternal grace was strongly present. The widow remarked in her speech how he is now resting at Abraham's feet. (L6, w68)

For this writer, the religious connotations were emphasized in connection with the graveyard, which represented a deathscape in which ritual space was surrounded by nature. Christian hope was connected with the history of religion when the writer talked how the body was now resting at Abraham's feet. This is reminiscent of what Avril Maddrell (2016: 180) writes on religious-spiritual beliefs: 'For the faithful, these beliefs play an important role in mediating loss, envisioning the ongoing life of the deceased.' The graveyard was both an important physical place and a ritual space with religious importance.

Many others wrote with a focus on nature present in the graveyard and tied this to the memory of the deceased. A daughter writes on her father's love of nature:

The whole ritual was organized outside, which reflected a special beauty on it. It was at the end of April; spring had started, and it was a sunny day. ... The summer cottage at Lake Saimaa was a special place for my father and the farewell to him in the awakening nature was a beautiful and worthy tribute to his life, which reflected the

eternal hope of meeting once again.  
(L14, w51)

Thus, nature brought about memories of the deceased during the funeral service at the graveyard. Additionally, it described nature as a ritual space in which the sacred was present. The relationship between the bereaved and the deceased was rendered palpable with the hope of meeting again; there was a hope that the bond would continue.

In the Finnish tradition, the coffin is centre-stage when the mourners move from the funeral in the chapel to the burial at the cemetery (Pajari 2014b). A daughter explains how the coffin was situated during her mother's funeral:

Because of the coronavirus restrictions the ritual was organized outside the chapel. The coffin was on a stretcher during the ritual. ... The burial outside was not a new thing for me; however, the way in which the coffin was placed on a stretcher was new for me. In my previous experiences of outdoor burials, the coffin was lowered into the grave before the burial and the ritual was organized around the grave. My mother was more present this way. The decision was made by the parish. ... We did not complain that it was organized outside because mother had enjoyed being outdoors and loved the birds. (L42, w55)

In this narrative, the actual focus is on the grave, which together with the surrounding nature makes this deathscape meaningful and personal. The writer shared how she was a cantor in another parish and served as a cantor also during the burial of her mother. This might have influenced how closely she reflected on the coffin and

how she felt that her mother was closer to the bereaved in this way than if the coffin had already been in the grave. The words of this daughter confirm that many Finns regard nature as an important ritual space and consolation, like Scots, who live close to nature (Maddrell 2010).

Despite only forming a small portion of the data, some of the authors wrote on virtual attendance. A widower explained how one of his children organized video streaming: 'With their [the son and his family's] help at the last moment we could organize YouTube streaming for friends and siblings around Finland' (L25, w75). Most writers do not describe in detail how the videos were taken, as what was more important for them was to explain who was physically present. Another widow counts the people in her husband's funeral: 'In addition to me, it was our two adult children, the pastor and cantor, as well as two photographers – one shooting video and other one pictures' (L40, w76). For her it was not important to explain what type of video was taken and how those who did not attend got access to it. Rather, she counted the people present, in which these two photographers were also included. She did not comment either on the importance of the video footage to those who could not physically attend the funeral.

Some reported that they were able to attend the funeral service spiritually by organizing a shrine or memorial table with flowers at home and by lighting a candle during the ritual, even though they did not follow the funeral service digitally. A widow writes:

Many of our friends joined in the grief. They built a memorial table with flowers for my husband and lit a candle during the burial service. Some lit candles in their windows. ...

Afterwards they sent me pictures of these events. We were not alone even though only the family could attend the funeral. (L38, w74)

Friends were not physically present at the funeral, but they were able to participate spiritually through the ritual space which they created in their homes. To receive pictures of these memorial tables and lit candles was meaningful for this widow, so that she could herself participate in this ritual afterwards while browsing through the pictures on her phone. This example shows that it was not only those at a distance who shared the spiritual experience but also that those attending the actual service on site could be part of the spiritual space. Nor was it only old people who organized memorial tables. A grandchild writes:

My husband and child lit a candle during the burial service and held a silent moment. When I came home, my ten-year-old asked me: 'Was it a difficult journey?' I responded yes, but it was important to participate. The child responded: 'I think so as well. It would have been difficult, but I would have wished to be there too.' (L13, w43)

The whole family could not participate in the funeral; the mother whose grandfather had died was the only one attending. Her husband and child joined the funeral spiritually. Thus, spiritual space was understood to be better than being completely left out of the mourning, but not as good as attending the funeral in person. What strikes me as most interesting in the quotation above are the words of a ten-year-old: he would have wanted to participate in the burial service even



though he understood that it would have been difficult. This child has grasped the vital essence regarding the importance of attending a ritual, despite the emotional burden which often accompanies it.

The data of this study reveal that participation in the funeral service was found to be very important during Covid-19 in Finland. Alternative places, such as a funeral service outdoors by the grave, were also well received. Virtual attendance was considered less ideal than having the chance to participate on site for the funeral and burial. The writers considered virtual attendance to be passive and lacking a communal dimension. Restrictions resulted in smaller funeral services, but most writers reported meaningful experiences of personalized rituals in overlapping physical, virtual and spiritual spaces.

### **Creative memorial spaces**

Many letter writers decided either to postpone a memorial service or to scale attendance down during the restrictions. Those relatives who organized the memorial service during the pandemic used their creativity to organize them during restrictions, with some of the memorials taking place in a virtual space.

A niece describes an informal memorial coffee directly after her aunt's funeral:

A few days beforehand I suggested to the son (of my deceased aunt) that we should have coffee. He agreed. My sister and I baked some simple Karelian pies and buns, and he bought a cake. We had the coffee on his terrace standing in our winter clothes. ... Spontaneously we started to share memories of our aunt, one after the other. The moment was pleasant and did not last long. At the end, we concluded that this was exactly the

type of a funeral that aunty would have liked! (L32, w65)

The above discussion of an informal memorial service includes all that is central to a successful memorial: a community of the bereaved, a chance to share memories and, lastly, that it be in accord with the personality of the deceased. The niece felt that in spite of the restrictions and small number of attendees, this funeral and memorial of her aunt was something that the deceased herself would have approved of. The personalization of funeral and memorial services is an international trend, which in recent years has also become more prominent in Finland (Vähäkangas and Mäki-Petäjä-Leinonen 2020).

Others reported on the use of virtual memorial spaces, which made it easier to share memories during the pandemic. A daughter-in-law writes:

We wrote a message and sent a link to those family members and friends who would have attended the funeral in normal times. We said that they could share the link with those who knew mother-in-law. In the link there were memory pages, a short memoir, and pictures from her life. Later we added pictures from the funeral. It was possible to add comments in the pages and many did so. (L3, w59)

Fundamental in these online memorials was the chance to participate, as we see from the quotation above. Many added their comments to the memorial pages and thus took part in remembering their loved one. These virtual forms of space on the growing number of online memorial sites have been noted in previous research as well (Maddrell 2010, 2016; Hutchings 2012; Myers and Donley 2022).

Online memorials are thus relational and significant to those who participate.

Others organized the memorial service only after the strict restrictions were lifted. The following 73-year-old friend wrote on a memorial that started with a video from the burial service:

We saw the burial service from a big screen. This video experience was extraordinary, at least to me and to my husband. ... We absorbed the feeling of the funeral well. When the pastor started the words 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust', we all stood up. (L21, w73)

This friend was not invited to the funeral and could not participate digitally either. In her letter, she told how disappointed she was at not being able to participate. From the description above, we can see that in the memorial service she had a feeling of participating in the funeral as well, albeit after the fact. What was important for her was that this was done together with a community of mourners. This experience shows how various spaces and places intertwine in a fusion of virtual space into the actual site, which was present in the video. The description shows how multi-dimensional spatial understanding can be. Deathscapes during Covid-19 in Finland, therefore, contain both onsite and online spaces as well as social and ritual spaces – and often several of these simultaneously.

Some of the memorial services were also organized outdoors following the Finnish Covid-19 recommendations. A 50-year-old daughter writes:

The memorial service was organized in August in my youngest sister's courtyard so that we could be outdoors, as the coronavirus authorities recommended. ... In total, twenty-six people

participated, which was a joy. Happily, also, the weather was good, and the day as a whole was successful. At the beginning of August, the coronavirus situation was fairly good and there was a relaxed atmosphere. We avoided shaking hands and hugging each other but we ate at the same tables and talked for a long time. (L5, w50)

This example shows that memorial services were also organized outdoors. During the Covid-19 restrictions, other outside events became popular in Finland as well since wider attendance was accepted there.

Participation on site or online did not make as big a difference for memorial services as for funerals and burials. For memorials, it was more important that people could join in mourning together, either physically or in online space. In these accounts, concurrence was not central either. Moreover, many of the reported memorials were organized in private spaces, which helped to avoid restrictions. Memories could be shared in multiple spaces and at different times while still contributing to the common mourning.

### **Discussion: physical, virtual and spiritual spaces**

Utilizing a thematic analysis of forty-five letters of people sharing their experiences of participating in funerals during Covid-19, this article has explored which spaces were used in Finnish funerals and what they reveal about deathscapes during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has used the spatial lens of the deathscape to understand the experiences of funeral attendees during the pandemic. The findings reveal that physical, virtual and spiritual spaces co-produce deathscapes during Covid-19 in Finland (Maddrell and Mathijssen 2022). The results further reveal that the most

important experience of funerals during Covid-19 was physical attendance. This possibility was preferred, and it made attendance at the funeral special.

Most participants could not participate in the preparation and viewing of the body, as is sometimes customary, but they could follow documentation of this process. Viewing and escorting the body are important parts of memorial practices, as was clear in the data of this article. Rituals of memory influence a person holistically and acknowledge the body (Davies 2017, 2011). This makes rituals especially important in bereavement. Embodiment is also central to bereavement, as the bereaved holistically reconstructs her/his own life history and relationship to the deceased (Davies 2017, 2011; Walter 1996, 1997). Bereavement is conceptualised as an ongoing process of negotiation and meaning-making (Valentine 2008). Participating in the funeral, burial and memorial services during Covid-19 evoked emotions as part of the bodily experience. Previous research shows that emotions motivate one to search for a meaningful life (Miller-McLemore 2013; Moschella 2016: 25–7). Additionally, research reveals that funeral rituals are an important channel for emotions following bereavement (Castle and Phillips 2003) and participation in them is thus an important part of remembrance (Davies 2011). Rituals serve as a channel to escort the deceased (Romanoff 1998), and for this reason lack of participation in the ritual can influence one's experience of bereavement.

Some of the reported funerals were also attended virtually, but the letter writers themselves participated either on site or did not participate at all. The instructions given to the participants of this study, which focused on restrictions during Covid-19 and not on the spaces and places used in the funerals, have most probably influenced

the results. In many other countries, the pandemic was so difficult that virtual attendance was the only possibility (West and Rumble 2021). This was not, however, the situation in Finland. Online mourning was more often reported in the data. While previous research conducted before the pandemic has revealed that especially online mourning has increased communal aspects of mourning (Walter 2015) and that live webcasts of funerals are sent to existing networks of families and friends (Hutchings 2017), research on digital deathscapes during Covid-19 has shown that mediated funeral environments offer some sort of compromise but cannot replace traditional physical funeral practices (Alexis-Martin 2020).

Another aspect which seems to be influenced by the wording of the writing instructions is how sparsely the data talks about the church and chapel spaces. Previous research stresses the importance of the church or chapel as part of the deathscape (Pankakoski 2020.) The results of this study report funeral experiences during abnormal times, and it might be that people could not focus on the physical surroundings because the restrictions took centre stage. Outdoor burial spaces were frequently described in the data, which show that many Finnish burial services were organized outside during the pandemic. The participants enjoyed these outdoor burials and felt that the surrounding nature was a comforting space during stressful times. Previous research on cemeteries indicates that they are meaningful spaces for many bereaved (Francis *et al.* 2005). Burials next to graves were common in Finland before chapels were built at the cemeteries, after which funeral services have been mainly organized inside (Pajari 2014b).

It is striking that many participants also

wrote on the opportunity to participate in the funeral from a distance via spiritual attendance through simple ritual acts, like lighting a candle or preparing a memorial table. What is fascinating is that these rituals were organized during the funeral. There is a significant amount of previous research on memorial tables and other post-mortem rituals (Mathijssen 2018; Vähäkangas *et al.* 2021; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2009), but in these the memorial ritual is organized after the funeral. In the reported rituals here, a self-created ritual space was formed, and it seems to have had a spiritual connection to the burial, which was organized at the same time. This finding from the data resonates with Maddrell's (2016) conclusion that in part the virtual arenas are non-material spaces associated with religious beliefs and spiritual practices. I decided to call these spiritualized spaces, following the way in which Terhi Utriainen (2020) has differentiated between rituals and ritualization in her recent work. Similarly, Leonie Kellaher and her colleagues (2007) have used restorative ritualization in their work on grief. All those who wrote on spiritual space in the data for this study seemed to be rather religious and their ritual space included religious elements such as a candle or silent moment, as well as such memorial elements as a picture of the deceased. In this aspect also, the findings of this study differ from previous research on memorial rituals, according to which non-religious people participated in various post-mortem rituals as well (Mathijssen 2018; Vähäkangas *et al.* 2021; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2009). These self-created ritual spaces characterized multi-dimensional understandings of the deathscape, but further research is needed to better ascertain what these spaces mean, and if they are only individual spaces or if

participants find them to be shared spaces.

The number of funeral attendees reported in the letters was limited because of the Covid-19 restrictions. In Finland, the size of funerals/burial services and memorial services has been getting smaller in normal times as well. This trend was only intensified by the restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lowe *et al.* 2020). The question emerges, how will this affect bereavement rituals in the long run? Traditionally, funerals have served as a public memorialisation for the whole community, but this tradition is now changing towards more private funerals and memorials, which one attends by invitation only. This seems to follow an international trend (Pajari 2014a; Lowe *et al.* 2020) in which only the immediate family attends the ceremonies and friends are not invited. During the pandemic, the role of funeral agencies has increased, as was seen in connection with the viewing of the body. This also seems to follow an international trend in which the role of funeral agencies is stronger than the role of a single religious community, as is still the case today in Finland (Pajari 2014a; Schäfer 2007).

Writers who described their experiences of deathscapes during Covid-19 were people of middle age or older and more religious than the other writers of the letters. Additionally, they were mainly women, which can be seen from the direct quotations provided in this article. In the whole data set, a quarter of the writers were men, but most of them reported on restrictions, not on how Covid-19 influenced multi-dimensional understanding of funeral space. From this data, however, it is impossible to make overly far-reaching interpretations of gendered differences in bereavement (Doka and Martin 2010) or with regards to the influence of gender towards understanding

of deathscapes (Maddrell 2020) or to on-line memorials during the pandemic (Myers and Donley 2022). It seems that those who were more used to attending funerals were able to analyse various spaces of the funeral process and their meaning through their letter. A new publication by the ELCF might partly explain the age, gender and religious background of these writers. This book identifies Finnish generations and describes their attitudes towards religious traditions (Hytönen *et al.* 2020: 251–5). In line with the demographics of the current data set, a third of the writers belong to the generation born during or right after the Second World War, and according to Maarit Hytönen and her colleagues (p. 252) represent the generation of major changes in Finnish society; they are now 68–77 years old. The following group, the generation of the suburbs (53–67 years), comprises the second-biggest set of writers. These generations value Lutheran funeral traditions and, according to Hytönen and her colleagues (2020), they represent so-called cultural Christianity, which appreciates Lutheran cultural homogeneity as part of Finnish identity. To this day, the funeral ritual remains part of those Lutheran traditions that many people want to pass on to younger generations. However, this might change in the future, as the decline of Lutheran marital and baptismal rituals seems to indicate such an overall trend (statistics of activities, ELCF 2020).

The experiences of the bereaved in their letters are marked by the difficulties presented in following the burial wishes of the deceased during the Covid-19 restrictions (Vähäkangas and Mäki-Petäjä-Leinonen 2021) and making the funeral more personal (Caswell 2011; Ramshaw 2010; Schäfer 2007). The findings of this article, however, show that the Covid-19 restrictions created a possibility to find

and open new places and spaces to make burial and memorialisation personal. An important part of this personalisation was the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased. Previous research from Norway has revealed that the fluidity of commemorative space facilitates this encounter between mourners and the deceased (Høeg 2021). Relationship is central also for Maddrell (2016), who concludes that there is an ongoing emotional relationship between the mourners and the deceased.

Another important aspect of personalization which was frequently reported in the letters was nature, which indicates both the importance of nature for Finnish spirituality and the privatization of spirituality. The importance of nature in Finnish spirituality has been noted in previous research by the ELCF, although it does not deal with that in terms of bereavement (Salminen 2022). Previous death studies in Finland do, nevertheless, analyse the importance of nature as a ritual space for the bereaved (Butters 2017, 2021).

Deathscapes during Covid-19 in Finland contain both onsite and online spaces as well as social and ritual spaces – and often some of these simultaneously. The small qualitative data set of this study indicates that participation on site was very important for Finns even during the pandemic. The most important in these descriptions was how well a participant could share mourning with others in these spaces. This seems to indicate that social and ritual spaces are central when discussing the deathscapes of Finnish funerals during the time of pandemic restrictions.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find out which spaces were used in Finnish body preparations, funerals and memorials, as

well as what they reveal about deathscapes during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings reveal that participation in the ritual was more important than the actual site of the funeral, burial or memorial. Especially during funerals and burials, it was important that there was a possibility of social and ritual space. The stress surrounding participation made participants of this study upset about not being able to participate in body preparations and viewings. Similarly, quite a few participants wrote critically on virtual attendance, which they did not see as participatory. Here we have to remember that none of the letter writers themselves ended up participating virtually, even though a virtual option was available for many of the reported funerals. The participants saw mediated funeral environments as offering some sort of compromise but unable to replace traditional physical funeral practices. Online memorials were instead found to be a useful way of common mourning. Furthermore, spiritual attendance was understood to create ritual space and a feeling of being part of the mourning community. The ritual of preparing a memorial table or lighting a candle during the funeral is a traditional practice in Finland, practised even before Covid-19 among those who could not attend the funeral, but during the pandemic this practice seems to carry additional meanings; accordingly, rather many reflected how important this type of participation was. Nature as such was understood to be a ritual space, and this made burial services at the graveyard both accepted and widely reported in the data. Hence, the pandemic returned a tradition of organizing burial services at the cemeteries, and it will be exciting to see whether this accepted tradition will continue after Covid-19.

The findings indicate that deathscapes during Covid-19 in Finnish funerals typically dealt with how ritual space was created during the restrictions. Thus, one could say that these spaces emerged in the interaction between the restrictions and the wishes/goals of the mourners. The physical site was found to be important as long as it created ritual space and fit with the personality of the deceased. Central in these actively created spaces was that they followed the body of the deceased either physically, virtually or spiritually. This process of following the body contained an additional aspect, namely, that death is concretely viewed in spatial terms when the deceased has crossed over to the other side and only their dead body is still visible. The results indicate a multi-dimensional spatial understanding in which various overlapping deathscapes were found to create meaningful experiences despite the restrictions. ■



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Nordic research project 'Youth at the Margins: A Comparative Study of the Contribution of Faith-based Organisations to Social Cohesion in South Africa and Nordic Europe' (YOMA, 2013-17) and a Finnish multi-disciplinary project 'Meaningful Relations: Patient and Family Carer Encountering Death at Home (2017-21)'. Photo: Linda Tammisto.

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