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Death and beyond

Thoughts and preparations for the final journey

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Based on extensive ethnography, this article investigates how contemporary Finnish hospice patients talk – or remain silent – about their own approaching death, and the imageries relating to death and the possible afterlife. I explore how the thought of an afterlife may have informed patients' orientations at the end of life, and how it touched on actual funeral arrangements.

Since death was a very difficult topic to speak about, the dying created other kinds of material or entirely fantastic imageries which helped them to explore and express their feelings about death and the beyond. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of 'metaphysical imagination' (Hepburn 1996) and 'virtuality' (Deleuze and Guattari 2016; Kapferer 2004, 2006, 2010), this article shows how the virtual space of the metaphysical imageries by the research participants at times became a vital element empowering the dying, not only to encounter their situation but also to achieve resolution of some sort.

> 'There is even a certain sense of destiny here. I feel myself like one of those Native Americans, to rise up that high mountain and then dive down from there, and that would be the end of it. I am not scared. I am not scared at all.' (Interview, Oiva[1])

Introduction

The research question, material and method

Finland is often described as being one of the most culturally and ethnically homogeneous countries in Europe (Larson *et al.* 2022).[2] Even if this view reflects the conscious historic project of nation-building in Finland (Anderson 1991) rather than actual reality (Tervonen 2014), there is some truth to it. In regard to religion, for instance, before the era of globalization began in the 1980s, membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church comprised over 90 per cent of the population. The so-called uniform culture started to dissolve in Finland already in the 1960s with structural societal changes that led to a rapid urbanization of the country. The number of inhabitants with a foreign background has grown more than tenfold in the past thirty years, from approximately 40,000 in 1990 to 450,000 in 2020 (Tilastokeskus 2020). Today, Finland is more multicultural than ever and church membership has dropped to 67 per cent in 2021, with every sign that it will continue to decline.

1 All the names of the research participants mentioned here are pseudonyms.

2 I wish to thank my anonymous peer reviewers for their careful reading of my article and for their helpful comments and insightful suggestions.

Regardless of these recent cultural changes, the culture of death in Finland and especially its funeral practices continue to be dominated by the Lutheran Church (Butters 2017). The general religious landscape has changed, however, and Christian religious language no longer seems to resonate with many Finns.[3] Therefore, it is reasonable to ask how, given this kind of cultural context, people talk and think about existential matters such as death. Hence, this article explores contemporary Finns' ways of talking about and imagining death and the beyond.

When I started studying hospice patients, the question of language intrigued me. I was curious to learn how urban Finns, for whom these issues had become both personal and timely, talked about death and dying, and with what kind of language. Or was death talked about at all? Along with the matter of language, I also wanted to learn about the different (ritualized) activities taking place – and at times initiated by the dying.

My research material was collected during a period of ethnographic fieldwork with hospice patients at a hospice home and at a university hospital during 2014–17. Research permission for these two research sites was granted after I received approval from the medical ethical board of the university hospital. The actual research process was carefully planned and executed following the ethical guidelines given by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), which defines three different areas of ethical principles: respecting the autonomy of research subjects, avoiding harm, and maintaining privacy and data protection (TENK 2009). All of these were attended to in the research process while paying special attention to the safety and privacy of vulnerable research participants (for more details, see Butters 2021: 59–66).

In addition to observations documented in my research diaries, I had long conversations and ethnographic interviews with twenty-one patients over a span of months and years. The ethnographic analysis is a process of its own, which often starts already in the field and continues throughout the research process until the final report is written. I sketched out my initial understanding of the predominant themes in my research data after some time in the field, and thereafter the process of analysis continued in a hermeneutic manner, with constant polylogue between my analytical reflections, the actual research data, and theoretical conceptualizations. In my analysis, I applied the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), commonly used in qualitative studies in the field of healthcare (Smith *et al.* 2009).

IPA focuses especially on the question of how people ascribe meaning to their experiences in their interactions with the environment. On a practical level, the analysis was done by a careful reading of the transcripts (and other texts relating to the field); by listening to the recorded material in order to remember the field experiences; and by looking for recurrent

3 This notion has been anecdotally shared with me by several priests working in the larger capital region of Helsinki during the last decade; there have also been discussions in the Christian media about the loss of meaning of religious language (see e.g. Kuula 2022). The issue is reflected in the realm of death and dying as well. As a hospice patient and advocate for atheists, Pietari Vanhala commented to the *Helsingin Sanomat* (the largest newspaper in Finland), 'We don't even have a vocabulary to handle the death of those who do not believe in a soul or the supernatural' (Nykänen 2015).

phrases and themes, as well as connections and relationships between them. I paid special attention to the choices of expressions and words, and what other types of communicative modalities arose in different situations. The findings were then reflected against my theoretical sources. An important feature of IPA arises from the idea of the hermeneutic circle, which concerns the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole. The process of analysis requires constant evaluation of the relationship of any single part (e.g. a word, sentence, interview or episode) to the whole (correspondingly, a sentence in which the word is embedded, complete text, the whole research project or one's whole life). As Jonathan Smith and his colleagues (2009: 26) put it: 'To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts.'

Metaphysical imagination and virtuality

As for my theoretical tools regarding the manner in which my research participants were able to envision and act *vis-à-vis* their death and the idea of the afterlife, I draw on the concept of 'metaphysical imagination' (Hepburn 1996), which describes the practice through which one can actively imagine, create and try out new orientations and perspectives in the vicinity of death. Since language often fell short, my research participants engaged in creative expressions in order to be able to touch upon the difficult topic of death and dying. In addition to imagination, the idea of 'virtuality' as explained by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2016) and Bruce Kapferer (2004, 2006, 2010) also serves the analysis. Although these concepts come from different intellectual genealogies, they relate to similar aspects of reality.[4]

In my reading, 'metaphysical imagination' denotes the active practice of creating alternative perspectives for one's situation, whereas 'virtuality' is the dimension that becomes real as a result of that imaginative practice. For instance, in the quotation at the beginning, Oiva, a retired artist and one of my research participants, describes his imaginary vision about his end: how he climbs up to the top of the mountain and, like a Native American, throws himself bravely into the abyss. His virtual imagery draws on mythical stories about shamanic practices that could be associated with shapeshifting and other dimensional worlds (see e.g. Duerr 1985),[5] yet here it serves Oiva as a powerful antidote to his physical helplessness in the face of death. His fantastic idea was surely distanced from reality, but the virtuality of his vision did not make it any less effective. On the contrary, it was because of the distance that he was able to embrace the idea of death here.

In the realm of virtual reality, such as that found in art and ritual (Kapferer 2004), all potential and possible modes of being can become real. Deleuze and Guattari insist that virtuality is not merely something fictional and illusory but that it has the potential to enrich and enhance reality, even to the extent that the virtual becomes a *dimension of the real*. In the course of this

4 Ronald Hepburn's (1996) notion of metaphysical imagination draws on the theories of aesthetics. Bruce Kapferer (2004, 2006, 2010) also makes use of these when he writes about the Deleuzoguattarian concept of the virtual, which I follow here. Hence, these concepts have been combined before in the anthropological literature.

5 Popular authors such as Carlos Castañeda introduced this ritual – and, more generally, the shamanic worldview – to a wider audience.

article, I will present in more detail various acts of metaphysical imagination in the vicinity of death, in order to show how the virtuality that arises from these imageries can become an essential, even real, space for the dying, which empowers them to encounter their situation and may even help them to achieve resolution of some sort.

In regards to the epistemics of the analysis, I would like to note that perhaps more than at any other moment in life, customary ontologies can become shattered in proximity to death. To trace the readings of reality belonging to the dying themselves, I follow the imageries and metaphysical understandings of my interlocutors without seeking to make them perfectly rational or coherent, since in reality they were often fractured, momentary and even contradictory. Here, for instance, Oiva's active imagination gave him a virtuality in which he could die the way he desired; it does not mean that his worldview was necessarily very shamanic (or that he was actually going to jump off a cliff). Nevertheless, the virtuality served him well by giving him tools and a meaningful frame to talk about his death.

The article proceeds with a presentation of the ways in which hospice and palliative patients talked – and stayed silent – about death. I investigate the various expressions of virtuality and metaphysical imageries that my research participants had about death and dying, as well as how the thought of an afterlife potentially informed their orientation at the end of life. In the course of the article, I demonstrate how the whole act of funeral planning serves as an imaginative 'as if' play, a virtual playground in which one can try out and fashion the kind of final journey one wishes to have. I conclude with a review of how beliefs and thoughts of an afterlife possibly touched on the research participants' actual funeral arrangements.

Language, silence and imageries of death

Talk and silence about death and beyond

Death remains a difficult topic to talk about, even in hospice care. Even if the thought of death was in the 'back of the head', as one of my research participants described, it was rare to engage in death talk. As one patient noted, 'The thought of death is shared by everyone – in silence.' While the hospice staff sought to create space and opportunities for 'death talk' (i.e. the talk about death approaching), paradoxically it became loaded in the hospice environment. Not everyone in hospice care truly believes or accepts their prognosis, or they may simply not want to think or talk about it. In the hospice environment, 'death' is never merely a word that describes a general state of affairs; it becomes a personal and intimate thing, a word which at times also engenders magical sentiments. Even uttering or writing the word 'death' is sometimes feared, as if it might summon death and thus hasten one's end (see Tjørnhøj-Thomsen and Hansen 2015). Indeed, I felt that more than in any other occasion or situation, death talk in the hospice environment became burdened with additional unforeseeable implications and emotional reactions.

When the actual word was uttered, it was done so in a very conscious and careful manner. Most often, however, it was left unsaid. Once in the day-hospice group we were all discussing something about the hospice home and then someone blurted out something like, 'Well, that's why we're all here, that we …' The person never finished their sentence, and it was just left hanging in the air. While 'death' and 'dying' were almost taboo to talk about in a social context, they did come up in the personal

and rather intimate conversations and interviews I had with the patients.

Imageries of fear and hope

If death or the end of life was not talked about, the extension of life was – in the form of medicine. The matter of medicine was the one topic of conversation that filled the hospice home. Medical science was the most common shared source of (existential) hope, and as long as the patient was involved in any kind of medical treatments – including palliative ones – they felt that 'there is still hope'. Even when the patient was specifically told that they were being given palliative and not curative care, in reality it was difficult for them and their loved ones to differentiate between these. In terms of the virtuality, medicine offered a sort of virtual 'as if' world in which death could be kept at bay. Medicine was associated with hope and continuity, which for many of my research participants ended simultaneously with the end of their life. In other words, for most the hope was not about anything transcendent but immanent, concerning this world rather than any other.

Medicine also played a central role in the personal preparations for death. Hospice care was valued for this reason; it enabled a preparation – and even a promise – for as smooth an end as one could imagine. Few of my research participants commented on their specific wishes concerning the actual moment of death. Often these wishes or requests had to do with receiving sufficient pain medication, but I was also told about definite requests for *palliative sedation*,[6] which seemed to be a magic word used to calm patients who suffered from incapacitating fear about the approaching moment of death.

Kirsi, Taina and Vivian were among those patients who were promised palliative sedation if the end turned out to be 'very difficult'. Vivian, whom I knew for several months, talked about her paralysing fear almost every time we met. She told me that soon after her diagnosis, she had seen the 'image of her death': 'It was like a tsunami that comes and wipes everything out, like the one in Thailand where so many people died because they did not even think to escape from it.'[7] At first, the tsunami swept over her every hour; months later it happened once a day, and a year after the diagnosis the tsunami only hit her rarely. Yet, she shared that there was still no 'picture of solace' anywhere.

Vivian had truly tried finding consoling virtuality from all possible sources – from medical pills to God, without much success, according to her. Vivian's imagery relating to the end of life and death was simply filled with terror that had taken different shapes over recent months. At the point that she was bedridden and very close to death, the feelings of dread had dissipated, but she still feared the sensation of suffocation. The nurses had reassured her about the option of sedation if it came to that, and thus she was able to relax. Even if only at the level of thought, palliative sedation as a sort of

6 'Palliative sedation' refers to 'the use of medications to induce decreased or absent awareness in order to relieve otherwise intractable suffering at the end of life' (Olsen *et al.* 2010: 949).

7 Vivian's description of the tsunami in Thailand is specific and concerns those Finns who died in the tsunami there in 2004: many did not know that a withdrawing waterline indicates incoming tide. While the number of Finns who lost their life in Phuket was very small in relation to the size of the catastrophe for Asia as a whole, it remains the deadliest foreign incident to have affected Finns since the Second World War.

medical exit was the one thing that was trusted and could give peace and calm to Vivian and others seized by fear. In other words, the idea of palliative sedation gave them the virtuality by which one could imagine death to take place in a safe manner.

Even if sedatives had not been quite enough to dispel the anxiety that Vivian had experienced prior to her death, her relationship with her medicines was nevertheless distinctive; it was close, even intimate. When I met her the last time, only two days before she died, she said to me somewhat jokingly that they should put a syringe inside her coffin. 'In honour of the medicine', she explained, 'since it was the medicine that gave me time and it was the life-sustaining element in my life.' Throughout her illness and even at the moment of death, Vivian trusted medicine – more than God, for instance – to the extent even that, albeit in jest, she was willing to make a tribute to it by bringing a syringe with her to the grave.

Kirsi, another patient who put her trust in palliative sedation, explained to me that it would give her 'a soft death, in which one does not need to linger in pain until the very last moment'. She continued, 'With this lung cancer, I know people who have been in pain, gasping for air until the end, and I want to avoid this. The doctor has promised me this – of course, depending on the various factors at that moment then. But this is what I have wished for.' Kirsi had two alternative visions for her impending death. One was filled with anxiety and pain, a death which she described to me as being 'screaming red' in colour. The other one was 'a soft' kind of a death, which Kirsi said was 'somewhat light grey'.[8] This colour had come to Kirsi when she was participating in an art project at the hospice, and she found a picture of a painting which represented her anticipated 'soft death'. This picture of a misty landscape with a small Finnish lake or river offered an alternative to the 'screaming red death' of pain and anxiety. The painting was abstract enough not to force any explicit conclusions about the environment, and at the same time it made anything possible.

Kirsi explained how she was drawn to the painting because there was 'no heaviness' in the landscape:

> The images mirror themselves onto the water and it is completely still and quiet. And that which reflects the future, whether it is about being alive or about the afterlife, if there is any such thing [laughs], it goes on here … I found continuity. The water goes on. (Kirsi)

She described how she boarded a boat that started floating towards the shadowy mist – without knowing the destination but also not knowing fear (see Butters 2021: 4; about the art project, see Helin 2018). In this way, Kirsi was able to give the medical death an artistic image. With her active imagination, she defined her end in the manner she wished, not claiming any certain type of afterlife but giving it a possibility. In many myths worldwide, there is a strong association of bodies of water and boat journeys to the afterlife, and this is also the case in ancient Finnish mythology.[9] Drugs assured Kirsi of a safe, painless exit, but it was with the help of the virtuality of art that she found the kind

8 For the full ethnographic description of Kirsi's perceptions, see Butters 2021: 2–4.

9 For instance, in the Finnish national epos, the *Kalevala*, there are depictions of the river of death, Tuonen joki, which takes one to the (under)world of the dead, Tuonela.

of imagery for her death that suited her worldview, which did not claim anything about the afterlife but suggested some kind of a continuation of life in the image of water that kept running on and on.

I also witnessed a kind of surprised awe about the disintegration of the body prior to death. Vivian, who had earlier been so fearful, lost her fear at the end and instead experienced a strange feeling that her body 'stopped obeying' her. She described how odd it felt that her legs did not move at her command any longer and that she could not even recognize her face in the mirror. Her face looked alien to her and she felt like her features were lost. This did not frighten her; rather, it caused a kind of curious bewilderment in her.

Death's physical manifestation startled even those who would not admit to being afraid of death as such. Oiva, for instance, had had some consoling near-death experiences that had assured him, he explained, that death was a 'nirvana-like state' which was not to be feared (see Butters 2021: 174). Yet, when the actual moment drew closer, Oiva started getting a little nervous. Just a day prior to his death he told me that he had noticed how he was falling asleep all the time, even while eating. This was somewhat unnerving, Oiva said; it 'terrified' him a little. He told me that he felt like he needed to 'watch himself' every moment, in case he might 'accidentally die'.

For many of my research participants, the actual moment of death was preceded by weeks and months – and sometimes even years – of anticipation filled with a myriad of emotions. Among the research participants, there were also those (such as Oiva) for whom death represented some sort of exciting journey towards something new. Rather than signifying any clear concept or firm belief in the afterlife, these views were more like *chosen attitudes* towards death. I would claim, however, that whether the death-related imageries or ideas were based on chosen approaches or (non-)religious convictions, in both cases it was the cultivation of virtuality that made a difference. Virtuality created the needed space to adjust and to orient towards death, and perhaps even offered some imageries of the afterlife.

Imageries of afterlife

According to Gallup Ecclesiastica, in 2015 a majority of Finns (71 per cent) agreed with the statement that 'nobody knows what happens after death' (Ketola *et al.* 2018: 47). This was also the most common sentiment among my research participants. As Oiva explained to me, there was no point in speculating on metaphysical questions since there were no answers to those anyhow. However, almost half of Finns (49 per cent) believe that 'there is something after death but I don't know what' (p. 47).

This vague sentiment of hope about some sort of continuation of life was prevalent among my research participants as well. It came up in the interviews and the casual conversations I had with the patients. For instance, Taina told me that she had accepted that 'this is it', yet she was open to the possibility that there was something 'more' after death. With a little twinkle in her eye, she explained to me how she had told her adult children that after her death she would come and talk to them whenever there was something that she felt she needed to say. Still, being rather unsure about the possibility of the afterlife, Taina continued: 'I've said to them also, however, that if I have nothing to say then I won't come!' Taina laughed and added, 'Just in case!'

Expressions like this were perhaps shared as a form of consolation for loved ones as well as for oneself in the face of

imminent departure and separation. This is where the metaphysical imagination was used as a means to build a bridge between here and there, to create imageries of a lasting bond between the dying and the bereaved, and a connection transcending temporality (on the theory of 'continuing bonds', see Klass *et al.* 1996). Imageries such as Taina's humorous depiction of herself as a ghost connecting with her bereaved children created virtuality in which both the dying and the bereaved, together or separately, could practise and indeed enliven the idea of death. Furthermore, this virtual reality could have been activated at any point; it only needed a suitable experience and interpretation by any one of the actors involved.

Although many believe that life does continue in some way after death, according to Gallup Ecclesiastica, 39 per cent of Finns concur that 'death is the end' (Ketola *et al.* 2018: 47). While I did not commonly hear my research participants share that view, some did. Matti, a retired medical professional, thought of death as 'the big sleep', as in Raymond Chandler's famous novel of the same title, where the private detective Philip Marlowe thinks to himself:

> What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. (Chandler 1939: Chapter 32)

Matti's worldview was something we call 'scientific' (Haimila and Muraja 2021); for him, personal existence ended with death. People's perspectives regarding the absoluteness of death often softened towards the end of life. Even if someone had previously thought of death as 'the end of it all', in the proximity of the actual moment, to think of death as a 'total annihilation of all existence' became difficult, not only emotionally but also cognitively (see Sand *et al.* 2009). Here again, metaphysical imagination could offer solutions.

Instead of hearing about 'the end of it all', more typical were vague views, such as 'perhaps there is something out there' or 'we can never know what happens after death'. The categories of 'alive' and 'dead' became more fluid in proximity to death, and there was space for metaphysical imagination about a range of various possibilities concerning what may actually happen then and thereafter. Imagination gave my research participants virtuality that was not confined by the binary restrictions of language ('to be or not to be') but instead characterized by the simultaneous – and seemingly paradoxical – presence of both life and death. One way of joining the two opposites – life and death – is to combine the personal perspective with the cosmic. This can happen through religious thinking but also through natural sciences. For instance, Aili, a woman in her 80s, and Heidi, in her 50s, both believed that one returns to the 'greater cycle of nature and the universe'. The idea of 'returning to nature' can be interpreted in multiple ways: emphasizing the ever-continuing cycle of life and some sort of eternity in this continuity, or the end of one's personal life, or possibly both. In the Gallup poll, 27 per cent of Finns agreed with the statement that after death 'we blend back into the universe' (Ketola *et al.* 2018).

In my research overall, a range of views came up regarding the afterlife and there possibly being another world. Perhaps the most interesting point was that, as seen

with Taina, at times a person could have several, even mutually contradictory, ideas. Furthermore, there was self-reflexivity about the shifting nature of such views. For instance, Taina commented to me that 'for the time being' she was content with the idea of the non-existence of an afterlife, implying that at some point she might need to rethink the issue.

Regardless of one's ideas on the afterlife, there was one ritualized act which was directly aimed at the virtual creation of the hereafter. This 'death preparation ritual' (see Butters 2021) involved funeral planning.

Beyond death: funeral planning as a creation of the hereafter

Ritual creation of the hereafter

My ethnographic experience agrees with Tony Walter's (1996a, 1996b) notion that contemporary post-mortem rituals tend to revolve around the end of life instead of the afterlife. According to my observations, preparations for death (if there were any) were concerned mostly with practical this-worldly issues, such as financial arrangements or the sorting of one's materials and possessions. At times, however, there were attempts to orient towards the actual moment of death – and even to the thereafter. These kinds of orientations became discernible when people started planning their funerals.

Melissa Schilderink and Eric Venbrux (2019) have written about the 'postself', a kind of after-image of oneself that some terminally ill patients seek to create by writing blogs that will survive their death. Funerals could be seen similarly as a 'last act of power' in this world, which creates the 'last(ing) image' of the deceased. On the other hand, funerals are also the moment when any possible ideas related to the afterlife are carried out; a funeral ritual ought to be in accordance with a person's understanding of the afterlife. However, since the ideas about the hereafter were mostly very vague, funerary plans and preparations can also be seen as a sort of 'make-believe', being an attempt to ritually create the hereafter. Considering funerary planning from this perspective suggests that the whole notion of mortuary rituals can be understood as a form of a subjective, personal death preparation that includes metaphysical imagination and fantasies about the afterlife.[10]

The idea that attending funerals makes one think of one's own death is not new. Bronislaw Malinowski (1979: 46) noted quite correctly, 'Any survivor who has gone through a number of mortuary ceremonials for others becomes prepared for his own death'. Yet, contemporary studies on funerals commonly focus on the experiences of the bereaved as part of their grieving process rather than a form of personal death anticipation and preparation (e.g. Giblin and Hug 2005; Huibertha *et al.* 2021; Rawlings *et al.* 2022). In addition to psychologically oriented studies, mortuary rituals are, of course, a classic topic for anthropology, which approaches rituals from cultural and social perspectives. Here, funerals are investigated as social and cultural phenomena that reflect and are shaped by various cultural and socio-economic factors. In the anthropological frame, mortuary rituals have traditionally been understood in terms of a rite of passage, in which important transitions happen for both the deceased and for the society around the deceased (van Gennep 1960).

10 From this perspective, it does not even matter how the funerals are actualized later on, since it is the act of planning them that makes them virtually real for the dying themselves.

From the deceased's point of view, the correct execution of the death rituals is crucial since it guarantees a safe and successful journey from this world to the next, regardless of how the hereafter is conceptualized or understood. Funerals, therefore, can be approached as a large ritual drama, a ritual play in which the deceased's journey is prepared and played out in a subjunctive mode – 'as if' it was real (Seligman *et al.* 2008). By stepping into the ritual frame of funerals one accepts the rules and ideologies of that particular ritual drama, at least momentarily, enough to see the effort to make some plans about it. Indeed, those interlocutors who did not care to do any funerary planning often remarked that 'funerals are for the bereaved, not for the dead. I don't care what they will do with me.' This statement does not prove whether one believes in the afterlife or not, but it does reveal that in the opinion of the speaker, the function of mortuary rituals is *social*, not soteriological.

In what follows, I present two examples of funeral planning as a preparatory ritual by means of which the main ritual participant, the dying person, creates, visualizes and plays out their journey to their very own afterlife.

Getting ready for the journey to the hereafter

I met Eeva in the hospice. She was dying of lung cancer, but she was still in quite good condition and mostly in fine spirits. Compared to many of my research participants, Eeva's attitude towards her situation was rather exceptional; she had accepted it stoically. When her first symptoms appeared some years earlier, she had thought to herself, 'Oh well, I did smoke – alas, this is probably cancer'. Furthermore, Eeva's sister had died a few years earlier; according to Eeva, this had 'taught' her to 'process these things'.

Eeva's roots were in Karelia; she belonged to the Orthodox Church, and even though she did not consider herself a 'believer', Orthodoxy did seem to play a role in her life – and perhaps especially in her death. Eeva described her relationship to her faith by saying that she was religious 'in a typical Finnish manner', which for her meant 'I believe a little bit – but not really, however'. Perhaps it was the 'little bit' that opened the door to the possibility of alternative worlds of her death rituals.

When Eeva's sister had died, Eeva had made death garments for her. They consisted of a 'death shirt' (Fi. *kuolinpaita*), a white linen dress with a small collar, open at the back. Since her sister had lost her hair because of the cancer treatments, Eeva had also made a lace hat for her. Eeva's mother had handed this tradition down to her children, and when she had passed away, the daughters had washed her and dressed her in a death shirt that they had made. Next it was the sister's turn, and now it was Eeva's time. She prepared the death shirt for herself. In addition to the dress, she also sewed underpants and an undershirt, and she even knitted socks for herself.[11]

The fact that most Finns are dressed in a simple industrial death shirt that is made of paper-like fabric and originates from the 'exitus package'[12] suggests that the matter

11 Making one's own death garment is an old Finnish tradition; women sew the funeral clothing while men build the caskets (Pentikäinen 1990: 69–70). Interestingly, these traditions have been slowly revived over recent decades through courses and workshops, where people are invited to build their own caskets and design and make their own death garment.

12 Finnish hospitals and care homes (where most people still tend to die) are equipped with an 'exitus package' (*exitus setti*) that includes all the necessary items for the preparation of the body for the funeral.

of preparing the deceased for the funeral, and especially for what comes thereafter, is perhaps not of the foremost importance to the actors involved. In light of this, Eeva's efforts to make death shirts for her loved ones and for herself were noteworthy. Her practice was also in congruence with the Orthodox Christian tradition, in which it is very important that the body is dressed and decorated properly. Furthermore, she received the sacraments of the anointing of the sick and the Eucharist, which an Orthodox priest came to perform in the hospice. Preparations seemed important, even though she downplayed any possible religious sentiments about the priest's visit.

The death garments that Eeva had made comprised only a part of the complete funerary aesthetics of the Orthodox Church. According to Orthodox funeral preparations, after the deceased's body is washed and dressed, it is placed in the coffin, which is often white, the symbolic colour of the resurrection (SOK 2023). All of the clothing that Eeva made was also white. A cross, often made of wood, is placed around the deceased's neck and a traditional, beautifully embroidered cloth is placed on top of the body. While Eeva did not have such a cloth at hand, she had made a small one to cover her face, also following the custom. Eeva did not yet have the embroidered ribbon with the words 'Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us' that would be placed on her forehead. Often a small icon is also placed next to the body, inside the coffin, and she had hers ready to go with her.

One could conclude that even if Christianity did not 'work' for Eeva as a religious or soteriological system, it *did* seem to as a cultural and aesthetic frame in which to locate and enact her death. In the virtuality of the ritual, there was also (at least a possibility for) a spiritual meaning. Orthodox imagery meant something to Eeva; it resonated even if it did not have any definite metaphysical meaning to her. The 'little bit' that Eeva claimed to believe seemed sufficient for her to imagine her departure from this world in terms of definite Orthodox visuals. When we talked about spirituality and the existence of some divine principle and life after death, Eeva told me that her sister had had a dream, an omen, before she was diagnosed with cancer. In her dream, their mother had come to fetch her. Soon thereafter, the cancer was found. Eeva surmised, 'Maybe there is something out there, after death'.

In the end, Eeva concluded – like most Finns – that no one knows what happens after death. By investing in Orthodox practices and aesthetics, however, Eeva could engage with metaphysical imagination, however tentatively, and this opened up a crack in her ordinary, everyday reality. The aesthetics of her preparations played a central role here; her attention to the material dimension meant that it was transformed from a mere industrial paper cloth into a beautiful, handmade garment and meaningful framing for her death. Eeva also talked about the importance of the aesthetics in the Orthodox Church, observing that there was more room for mystery when there was no need to explain everything.[13]

Embodied aesthetic experiences, such as those occurring in rituals, can trigger metaphysical imagination.[14] Aesthetics

13 This perspective has also come up in other studies on the Orthodox Church. For example, Helena Kupari has noted that the aesthetics of the Orthodox liturgy seem to empower and reinforce the experiences of the sacred among Orthodox converts (Kupari 2023).

14 The philosopher Ronald Hepburn (1996), the first to write about the concept of

themselves – the materiality of colours, smells, shapes, sounds, light and shadows – rarely make propositional claims. Embodied aesthetics can elicit and lure one into envisioning possibilities, and may even hint at or suggest something, but they do not force one into any specific interpretation.[15]

The hereafter in sacred nature

A few of my interlocutors expressed a wish to have their ashes scattered in nature, often in the vicinity of their summer-houses or other locations special to them. This wish reflected their close relationship with nature; for many of my interlocutors, nature was *the* place where they could find peace and solace, as well as a healing break from the distress of the everyday – and dying. At times, nature was also experienced as something spiritual, and occasionally it was associated with supernatural events. This can be seen as a continuation of old Finnish pre-Christian folk religion and (death) culture (Butters 2017), or it can be interpreted as an expression of contemporary spirituality in which nature becomes sacralized (Pesonen and Utriainen 2014; Thurfjell *et al.* 2019; Thurfjell 2020). In the case of my research participants, it was probably a combination of the two, although I would highlight the position of the tradition, since most of the interlocutors leaned on their own cultural background when interpreting their nature experiences.[16] A few of my interlocutors perceived, for instance, a particular relationship between birds and death – a theme that is common in pre-Christian Finnish folklore (Holmberg 1915: 14; Pentikäinen 1990: 63; Honko *et al.* 1993: 610). According to tradition, the 'death bird' (*kalmalintu*) foretells one's approaching death, and the 'soul bird' (*sielulintu*) is a manifestation of the soul of the deceased, which visits grieving family members. The theme of birds – birds as omens or indicators of death – came up every now and then in my discussions with the dying (even if they were not familiar with the terms *kalmalintu* or *sielulintu*). Aili was one of those who had a personal story about a soul bird. After her husband had died a few years earlier, Aili would visit her community garden plot a lot. It was there that she had an extraordinary experience with a small wagtail (*västäräkki*). Usually she did not believe in 'these kinds of things', she emphasized to me, but this was something different. When she went to the garden, this little bird would come as if to greet her. For days, the little bird hung out with her in the garden, just being with her. There was definitely something extraordinary in this little wagtail, Aili concluded. After the arrival of this bird, she started thinking that 'something must be out there'.

Here the ordinary environment became extraordinary because of the unusual behaviour of the little bird. Aili found the supernatural amidst the natural; her actual reality transformed into enriched virtuality, in which things normally impossible be-

'metaphysical imagination', did so in relation to aesthetic experiences in nature, especially with landscapes. Hepburn's concept of 'natural' or 'environmental aesthetics' has since been broadened by some scholars to include the ordinary environment of the everyday (for 'everyday aesthetics', see e.g. Saito 2007). This kind of approach to aesthetics and aesthetic experience goes all the way back to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and pragmatism of John Dewey.

15 For more about the meaning of aesthetics in relation to death preparation rituals, see Butters 2016, 2021.

16 Obviously, modern nature spirituality also draws on ancient folk traditions.

came possible. For Aili, this virtual quality was continually present with nature in the sense that there was always something more there than what people initially see. The frozen soil, for instance, was not just barren land but held a promise of a new life that would be actualized in the spring. Therefore, it was perhaps not surprising that Aili was one of those interlocutors for whom the 'greater cycle of nature' was the post-mortem destiny.

Aili belonged to the Lutheran Church and had had a religious upbringing, but in the end, nature was the place where she felt elevated and the element that affected her in an empowering manner, both emotionally and spiritually. Her views affected her ideas about her funeral, which, just like Eeva, she had carefully planned. The first part of the ritual, the actual blessing of the body, was to be performed in the church, in accord with the traditional Lutheran liturgy. Aili stressed that she appreciated the Lutheran customs; she had selected hymns and other music that had personal meaning to her. Still, she did not want to be buried in the graveyard; as she had discussed with her child, she wished to have her ashes put into the soil of their country home.

As if to explain why she wanted to be buried in nature rather than in a graveyard, Aili showed me photos of her favourite landscapes. One was of a forest with a sacred juniper tree and another featured blue sky with great, white cumulus clouds hanging heavily on the horizon beyond the fields. There was a photo of a beautiful forest pond and another of morning dew on a clear, still lake. With her daughter, she had agreed on the exact spot where her ashes would go. Since Aili was now too frail to travel to the countryside, she had the habit of looking at these photos every now and then. I was impressed by their beauty, and Aili admitted that she was able to sense and feel the details of the landscape in her body just by looking at the photos. Through her imagination she was able to experience and enliven her favourite landscape; the virtual became very real to her.

Nature and earth were embodied in Aili's memories, being a part of her; accordingly, she hoped to be part of nature after her death, to literally become one with it. By imagining her ashes in this landscape so dear to her, she was able to live through – and beyond – her death. As Kapferer (2004) claims, ritual virtuality is not any less real than the actuality; it is instead a *facet of reality*. It has an impact and influence on people, and for the dying, a successful funeral planning can transform the end of life into a meaningful task that eases the departure.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how contemporary Finns who have been diagnosed with an incurable fatal disease verbalize and visualize their departure to the hereafter. The topic was only rarely discussed among my interlocutors, and often the whole question of 'what happens at the moment of death and thereafter' was simply left outside the discussion, sometimes with a notion that 'nobody can know about it'.

In relation to funerals, some of my research participants were very keen on practising their agency by making detailed plans about the arrangements, whereas others could not have cared less (or so they claimed, at least) since 'it relates only to those who stay behind'. Funerary planning can become a ritual of its own, in which one can either seek to create a desired post-self, a kind of 'last impression' of oneself, and one can create the funeral to support one's eschatological understanding of the afterlife. In such a secularized society as Finland today, the former might be more

often and more likely the case. I would argue, however, that even without any clear ideas about the afterlife – or even fuzzy ones – the whole act of funeral planning can become an imaginative 'as if' play, a virtual playground in which one can try out and fashion the kind of final journey one wishes to have. And at some point, the virtuality can become very real, like it did for Aili.

In order to support the space for such imaginative practices, one needs to have cultural and psychological access to the ritual elements and ideas that affectively function and are relevant for them. Based on my research, I would argue that when dying people feel empowered by their surroundings (whether consisting of medicine, religious elements, aesthetics of various sorts, or sentient beings such as people and pets), they can engage in activities where they deliberately rehearse the idea of death and practise their actual dying in the way that suits them. Simultaneously, these practices are aligned with what they envision to come after death. ■

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