

The Sustainable Dead

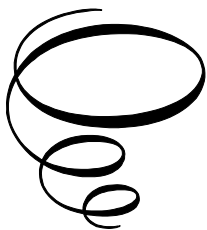
The Sustainable Dead:

Searching for the Intolerable

Edited by

Ruth McManus

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Ruth McManus
May 2022

CHAPTER ONE

EXAMINING SUSTAINABILITY AND DEATH

RUTH MCMANUS

INTRODUCTION

I believe that there is a groundswell in the convergence of sustainability and death studies. It is a particular kind of consciousness that is observable in current debates and themes in writings on death and sustainability. This state of mind is one of recognition and intolerance: recognition that death is unsustainable, coupled with an intolerance of the current status quo. This chapter introduces the contributions by way of a brief review of debates and discussions on sustainable death that identifies its major focus, emphasis and assumptions. What this book brings to the discussion is not only a broader account of this groundswell but also the chapters collectively offer an alternative approach to supporting social change for sustainability.

SUSTAINABILITY

First, humans are wasteful creatures. Through merely living we consume and generate waste from that consumption. I don't think we can stop being wasteful but what we can do is change the ways in which we systematically manage our consumption and detritus in ways that more efficiently, less toxically affect the biosphere. Second, we as people are heavily implicated in the issues we are trying to address through ideas of sustainability. This means that social change is central to any steps toward being more sustainable.

Sustainability has gained significant political attention over recent decades as climate change predictions based on the impact of human activity on the biosphere are beginning to eventuate in economically and socially costly ways. Sustainability is a contested term and there are multiple ways to define, understand and tackle it. Discussions about what it means have

fuelled governmental conferences, global reports and a multitude of international, national and local policies and reports. A baseline definition drawn from the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987) defined sustainability as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Approaches to sustainability then can mean a focus on evolving our systems of production and consumption in ways that are less toxic and depleting - often referred to as sustainability transitions. Notwithstanding these concerted efforts, “promoting human wellbeing while simultaneously conserving the natural environment has proven highly elusive” (Adger and Jordan 2012, 3). While everything in the world is in a constant state of flux, it’s quite a challenge to bring about change in desired directions and forms. If analyses and approaches only target environmental protection to the detriment of social needs not only does it impact people’s rights and liberties, but it also undermines effective and enduring social change as it is we who have to change our collective and individual habits and practices. A shift to a sustainability approach to protecting ecosystems acknowledges the social as well as ecological dimensions of reciprocity and responsibility, and so hopefully brings about more effective change toward less damaging patterns and systems of production, consumption and their generation of waste.

There is a core tension in the more general sustainability literature between two very different approaches to understanding and implementing changes that can move us toward more sustainable practices and processes. These are in brief a dualist approach that leans toward didactic forms of social change, basically telling other people what they should be doing based on a position of expertise (Bawden 2007). It is often known as an ABC approach of social change based on the belief that giving information will change attitudes that will in turn influence behaviour to bring about change (Shove 2010). While dominant in the environmental policy literature, it is profoundly challenged not only by its lack of effectiveness (because people tend not to change their behaviour especially as it relates to the environment, based on information drives) but it is also challenged by alternative approaches to social change that are based on an appreciation of context as the site and vehicle for social change. From this point of view, we all influence each other even in the ways we think about sustainability and it involves approaching sustainability as holistic and integrated where contextual solutions to contextual dilemmas is the key for constituting new practices (Page and Lovins 2007). These two positions can be thought of as

on a continuum – not directly in opposition to each other, but both signal the range of approaches that are found in discussions of sustainability.

SUSTAINABILITY AND DEATH

Even though the disposal of the dead is a significant and ongoing responsibility for every community in the world, issues to do with the sustainability of existing and future disposal of dead are pretty much ignored. Fan et al.'s study of Chinese cemeteries in Malaysia points out that “in the discourse on the environment, the relevance of cemeteries has largely been overlooked” (Fan, Voon, Ong, and Goh 2014, 86) and many studies argue convincingly that urban planning need to address cemeteries (Lai, Sarkar, Sun, and Scott 2020). Despite this lack of general engagement, there is significant scholarship on sustainability and death across the social science, science, policy and planning fields. Before embarking on an account of those discussions, it is useful to clarify some phrases that are used to flow across these discussions. First the phrase *death-styles* refers to the way a person's body is treated at and after death and the way the living perform these practices. The second, *sustainable death field* is used as a catch-all to connect researchers and practitioners across a diversity of literatures that span multiple academic disciplines, fields, sites of research and practice yet are united by underpinning questions about the environmental impact of what we, the living, do with our dead.

DEATH IS UNSUSTAINABLE

Getting to grips with sustainability and death means acknowledging it as a nexus that encompasses any kind of space. To borrow Rugg's (Rugg 2022) point about the field of cemetery studies, it is “intrinsically interdisciplinary, where nuance of meaning and degree of significance is best captured in the interstices between and interplay of separate discipline traditions, themes and methods” (Rugg 2022, 16). And to expand Rugg's point further, it encompasses not only “any space used to the interment of the dead either as full body or as cremated remains” (Rugg 2022, 16) but *also* existing and emerging processes for preparing the dead.

Currently death is unsustainable. If we start with the premise that being sustainable means managing a process or processes that interlock economy, society and environment in ways that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

(World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), in terms of managing the dead, the range of current practices and processes around the world, are unsustainable.

This unsustainability comes in a multitude of forms that indicate the interlocking aspects of economic, social and environmental dimensions of managing the dead. These include but are not limited to actively impacting ecosystems from groundwater pollution by saline contamination clouds (Oliveira et al. 2013) to the intense carbon footprint of concrete used for paths, headstones and berms, where making one ton of concrete releases approximately one ton of CO₂ into the atmosphere (Fantilli, Mancinelli, and Chiaia 2019). There is also the less direct but nevertheless ecologically significant continued expansion and landlocking of in perpetuity burial grounds that escalates land scarcity, gentrification and unaffordability for the living (Allam 2019; Amer 2020).

The ways that sustainability and death are approached in the literature on death have dominant points of focus, that are marked by particular types of emphasis and consistent assumptions. A key aspect of sustainability of death is materiality and spatialisation (Rugg 2022). What the living do with the material remains of the dead must engage with how we organise space. For instance, cemeteries are a space where the living put the remains of the dead. In terms of sustainability, it's the environmental impact of our use of (cemetery) space that is a focus for much of the writing on death and sustainability. Body processing infrastructure such as body washing, embalming and or cremation facilities are a distant second and the examination of the impacts of materials and processes used in the care of the dying is missing altogether. In terms of focus, cemeteries take centre stage (be they municipal, urban, green) as many social science, policy and planning analysts are now paying sorely needed attention to the active design of and cemetery administration for the whole community.

In terms of the emphasis within this focus on cemeteries, the role of cemeteries as green urban spaces and issues with that in relation to sustainability has a commanding position. Discussion can be broken down into those studies that focus on identifying and understanding the factors that hold the currently unsustainable practices in place and those that *ipso facto* offer solutions that would shift death-styles towards increasing sustainability.

Existing sustainability research indicates that the planning, development and management of cemeteries are conceptually and practically isolated from the planning, development and management of other public open spaces in many locations around the world. While many municipal authorities around the world are seeking to find ways to be more sustainable, there is very little flow-on from public open spaces to cemeteries. Cemeteries are consistently viewed as special places that isolates them from wider sustainability efforts by municipal authorities in for example Johannesburg, (Leuta 2019), Budapest (Sallay, Mikházi, Tar, and Takács 2022), Malmö (Grabalov 2018) and Beirut (Al-Akl, Karaan, Al-Zein, and Assaad 2018).

The perceived gulf between cemeteries and other open spaces is based on a specialness given to the primary users of cemeteries: the grieving. At heart, the specialness accrued to the grieving is the presumption that the social needs of the grieving are incompatible with and have to trump other users and environmental sustainability goals that maybe seen to infringe their use of these spaces. To elaborate, noting that even though cemeteries have always been multifunctional, Leuta (2019) argues we should move beyond the usual narrow and tiered understanding of cemeteries as primarily disposal and memorial sites with recreation use and background biodiverse habitats in the background, to more active multi-utilisation for instance as food production. However, the challenges and difficulties for officials being able to plan develop and manage cemeteries in strategic connection with open spaces are based on conflicts, where cultural beliefs are conflicting with roles as officials and broader sustainability goals. This approach to social change exemplifies a common theme in sustainability and death literature of cultural impediments to incorporating cemeteries into green infrastructure initiatives i.e. it is people's attitudes that are preventing more living human use of cemeteries.

Underpinning this theme is an assumption that there is a challenging relationship between cultural approaches to body disposal and moves to manage spaces more sustainably. Being aware of this assumption serves to highlight that it is important to pay attention to how social change is getting framed in sustainable death discussions. When there is a presumed lack of synergy between management and culture the default approach to social change is that an information or education prompted shift in people's attitudes will allow the green infrastructure experts to better reach their goal of more sustainable greenspace.

There is also the issue of how to understand socio-cultural activity in relation to the dead and sustainability. There is a propensity to view socio-cultural practices in isolated, simple and static terms – e.g. the grieving go to cemeteries firstly to inter their dead, then when visiting to grieve their loss in a place that has significant material and emotional meaning. Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou (Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou 2010) make special note to remind those concerned with sustainable death that cemeteries are socially and emotionally sustaining more than they are ecologically sustaining in that they give detailed user accounts of the multi-layered use of cemeteries that indicate the complexity and dynamism associated with primary users visiting cemeteries. Acknowledgement of the challenges their specialness poses underpins Francis's discussion of the social sustainability of cemeteries (Francis et al. 2010) and Woodthorpe's call for care in balancing the varying interpretations, demands and expectations of a cemetery's purpose and use (Woodthorpe 2011). These tensions tend to presume that using cemeteries means more and different people in them at any one time where we bump into the tension between primary and secondary users as involving sad people having to cope with happy people around them. Are there other ways to envisage a cemetery as green infrastructure? What about forestry and or regenerative green infrastructure, tree fruit production? Are there other ways that can offer multi-layered uses that fulfil cultural and green infrastructure needs and expectations?

The next step in this literature is debates on ways to breach this divide between culture and space management or end-users and manager / provider. Solutions involve calls to integrate cemeteries into sustainable urban greenspace planning. Integration can be based on calling out the inaccurate assumption that cemeteries are ecologically bereft spaces. One way this is done is by documenting existing ecological productivity of conventional or natural burial grounds as a way to acknowledge them as already existing green spaces (Loki et al. 2019, Clayden et al. 2018) or by recognising and documenting their existing multifunctionality (Grabalov and Nordh 2021; Nordh and Evensen 2018). The thrust of these studies is that cemeteries and burial grounds are not unique and should be integrated into green infrastructure planning systems in the strive for more sustainable management of public open space.

Another approach is to offer ways to bring together the demands and expectations of end users (as culture) and planning and management (as systems) into more sustainable alignments. The conventional argument offered to help align end users and providers is, as would be expected, to

consult with end user groups throughout the planning, implementation and management processes. But there are also those who call us to challenge encroachment that is blind to the economic worth of cemeteries precisely because they are socially and ecologically sustainable (Stanley 2021; Swensen 2018).

While this is only a brief summary it does, I would argue, capture the dominant focus and emphasis of the main body of academic literature on sustainability and the dead over recent years. When viewed from the perspective of how social intervention for sustainability is envisioned, the concept of social change offered in the various discussions of sustainable death is quite consistent - social change is perceived and achieved in these debates as expert driven, with respectful consultation. Social change towards sustainable death-styles is therefore deliberate, deliberative, and deliverable.

The focus, emphasis and assumptions of current discussions about sustainable death, while offering valuable insights into some aspects of the issue at hand, also raise questions about the limits they carry with them. A way to discuss these limitations is by way of two recurring themes across the literature. One theme in the literature across these different disciplines and fields of study is a gulf between culture and space management and planning. Cultural practices are a problematic area for space management focused planning. Space management is a closed world for many cultural analysts.

Another theme is a material and technological focus of the literature and of foregrounding space over processes - dealing with sustainability issues is a technical / material approach to space management. The upshot is that there is a lack of effective translation between technical and material with broadly speaking cultural aspects. Linked to this is a presumption that innovation is expert led: people and their cultures, habits, beliefs and or religions are the sticking point for adopting technologies or embracing new ways to plan, organise and manage these death spaces to be more sustainable.

The form of current discussions therefore raises questions about the emphasis of space over processes. And, about the material and technical emphasis of both the problem and ways to solve the perceived problem and ultimately about the models of and for change implied in the existing literature. These questions about how sustainability and death are currently

being approached inform the order of presentation, and the individual and collective contributions this collection makes to the debate and research on sustainable death.

ORDER OF CHAPTERS

The chapters resonate, extend, contribute, question, refute and rethink existing debates and themes in the sustainable death field. The chapters are presented along a continuum from substantive examination to the speculative envisioning of sustainable death-styles therefore drawing the reader up and away from an exclusive emphasis on the material. They are also organised to indicate different ways of conceptualising change that is already underway – some chapters advocate for the ABC approach while others note that expert driven deliberate and deliberative change does not capture the range of ways that sustainability and death are already getting put together.

In chapter two, Mathijssen offers a substantive study of changing engagement with the deceased towards a continuity of deceased in this world in terms of religions, biosocial and ecological dimensions which, when brought together, indicate a shifting relationship between the living and the dead. This is followed, in chapter three, with McWhinnie's study of sustainable death in Japan which reminds us that sustainable outcomes are, more often than not, an afterthought rather than a central driving force for changed death practices. It also reminds us that change is not always dependent on or effected by deliberate interventions. Chapter four by Lange takes us to Poland and a grass-roots movement to open up possibilities of doing things differently within a tightly controlled and deeply traditional socio-religious context.

Cultural practices are always transforming. Lyons approaches sustainability and death from the perspective of a funeral director hungry for some industry shifts toward sustainable practices in chapter five. She engages with a series of experiments in environmentally orientated death systems across the United States, United Kingdom and the Czech Republic, and the breadth of ways to approach disposal that are being rethought and tried on for size indicate that there is an active reworking of social narratives of connecting through death already going on in various locations around the world at the user / consumer level which are not driven by planners or space experts. Attitudes toward new technological processes in the United Kingdom are investigated closely by Robinson in chapter six who reports

on the status of alkaline hydrolysis as a specific body disposal technology on the brink of significant uptake. Eastwood in chapter seven tackles head on the issue of ways to change people's death practices through broadening their understanding (questioning their assumptions) about the eco-impact of different forms of body processing. Part substantive part speculative, chapter eight by McManus takes a networks approach to explore how to make connections between different eco-orientated death practices that step beyond chance and little pockets of activity to synthesise sustainable deathways across micro, meso and macro systems levels of individuals and systems.

Chapter nine, by landscape architect Bowring, resonates with the theme of multiple-use in green space, exploring the rethinking and reusing the place of the dead in society in ways that expand our conceptualisation of multiple use and multiple users to increase their positive contribution to environmental health. Pushing the envelope further, Scahill in chapter ten develops a vision of a bespoke resomation service facility that meets the specifications for respectful and resource-replenishing body processing. This chapter engages with the presumed contradiction between culturally effective provision of deathways and ecological sustainability (Allam 2020). To conclude the collection, Tassell-Matamua's chapter eleven asks us to engage in a conceptual reflection. While the other chapters and the enveloping literature on death and sustainability tend to focus on the material and technological aspects of disposal, this chapter takes us on a journey through reconfiguring the living's organisation of disposing of the dead. Tassell-Matamua offers a novel way to re-consider and ultimately re-align death systems. The final chapter, twelve looks back across the collection to consider the different ways each author engages with current debates and issues for death and sustainability. It is in the extensions and interjections to social change that the collection contributes to the discussion on death and sustainability.

CONCLUSION

While eco-lightbulbs, tiny homes and bans on single use plastic bags nibble at the edges of our profligate ways, ecological and social sustainability is beginning to profoundly challenge long-standing conventions in end of life care, grieving, bodily disposal and memorialisation. This collection brings together scholarship on the different ways that the aspects of dying, death, and memorialisation are influencing and being influenced by the global turn to ecological and social sustainability.

CHAPTER TWO

THISWORLDLY AFTERLIVES: THE RELIGIOUS, BIOSOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY OF THE DECEASED

BRENDA MATHIJSEN

When you yourself are the embodied continuance
of those who did not live into your time
and others will be (and are) your immortality on earth
Jorge Luis Borges (Lifton and Olson 1974, 69)

INTRODUCTION

“To garden soil thou shalt return”, “Resomation allowed as burial alternative”, and “This living coffin allows the deceased to become one with nature again.”¹ These three headlines were published in national media in the Netherlands in 2020 and reflect the global turn to social and ecological sustainability. In popular parlance we can witness an increasing use of terms like green, eco-friendly and environmentally-sustainable, and there is a growing concern with human rights and social equity (Merchant 2020). This is manifesting itself in lived expressions of “ecopiety” and “ecoplay”: practices of environmental virtue that people perform out of duty or delight (McFarland Taylor 2019, 3–17). These practices are not only shaping people’s lifestyles, but, as the headlines above indicate, also their “death-

¹ These three examples of newspaper headlines in the Netherlands were published in *Trouw*: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/wie-geen-begrafenis-of-crematie-wil-kan-zich-tot-tuinaarde-laten-verwerken~bbc4ecdb/>, *NOS*: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2356904-resomeren-het-oplossen-van-een-lichaam-toegestaan-als-alternatieve-begrafenis.html>, and *Het Parool*: <https://www.parool.nl/nederland/deze-levende-doodskist-laait-overledenen-weer-een-woorden-met-de-natuur~b54fc8c9/>, all accessed on 10 January 2021.

styles” (Davies 2015, 26). Therefore, this chapter explores how the turn to social and ecological sustainability is impacting on people’s lived afterlife beliefs, that is their understanding of and engagement with the continuance of the deceased.

The focus of this chapter is on contemporary Europe; particularly the Netherlands. In this context, for most of the 20th century people’s engagements with the deceased were strongly influenced by two authorities: (Christian) religion and medical institutions. At the dawn of the 21st century, however, the authority of institutions and the religious observance of people had declined (Davie 2002; Bernts and Berghuijs 2016), and death practices and beliefs became inspired by other social developments. First, the emanating turn towards individualism, which has been evidenced by the rise of so-called personal or DIY funerals and the plurality of religious subjectivities and secularities (Venbrux, Peelen, and Altena 2009; Mapril et al. 2017). Second, the digital revolution, which has manifested itself in the use of novel technologies such as social media and augmented reality (Kasket 2019). And, third, environmentalism, which is reflected by the recent emergence of natural burial, alkaline hydrolysis, electric cremators and other sustainable death practices (Rumble et al. 2014).

This chapter takes this transition from formal religious and institutional understandings of the continuance of the deceased to informal and individualised practices as a starting point. On the basis of in-depth interviews and participant observation it investigates contemporary engagements with the deceased in the Netherlands, and argues that we can observe a development from otherworldly afterlife beliefs which emphasise the continuity of the deceased in the afterlife, to thisworldly engagements with the deceased which affirm the sustainability of the deceased in the here and now. Affirming the continuity of the deceased in this world, the chapter illustrates, happens in three dominant ways: religious, biosocial and ecological.

To make this argument the chapter first theoretically discusses how notions of continuity play a central role in human engagements with death and how the deceased can be sustained in religious, biosocial and ecological ways. After discussing methods, the chapter then zooms in on concrete practices of religious, biosocial and ecological sustainability. It concludes by reflecting on how this research contributes to debates on death and ecological sustainability.

CONTINUING LIFE IN RESPONSE TO DEATH

Continuity - or sustainability - is central to the many human engagements with death that can be observed around the world. Scholars who study death, for example anthropologists and sociologists, have been concerned with the various ways in which life persists, is regenerated, or has the last word (Engelke 2019; Bloch and Parry 1982; Hertz 1960). They have explored how humans speak against death and seek to conquer it (Canguilhem 1989; Davies 2002), whether it is by creating beliefs, performing rituals or sharing myths (Berger and Kroesen 2016), through art (Laqueur 2015), or by using technologies such as digital environments, artificial intelligence or cryonics (Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie 2020). Overall, scholarship shows that humans are bound to their own positionality as living, (self)conscious and relational beings, at both the cognitive and social level, which compels them to stress the continuity of life in their responses to death and their experiences of loss (Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 2015).

One way in which humans affirm continuity is by emphasising the sustainability of the deceased. The deceased can be sustained in varied ways, both literal and symbolic (Kastenbaum 2004), and people can employ religious, medical, technological, ecological, social and / or psychological images to do so. In most of 20th century Europe, Christian religion - its institutions, experts, communities, and traditions - provided people with a “sacred canopy” to deal with the pertinent questions and ambiguities of death (Hjelm 2018, 865; after Berger 1973), and it offered the dominant discourse for framing the continuance of the deceased. Examples of traditional Christian afterlife beliefs are the belief in heaven or paradise, the immortality of the soul, bodily resurrection, and - at the level of collective eschatology (Walls 2007) - beliefs concerning the Last Judgement and the Kingdom of God. Importantly, many of these Abrahamic beliefs are understood to be transcendent or otherworldly. They speak of an existence in another realm or in a world to come; an existence detached from and unlike that of the living.²

Although traditional afterlife beliefs have an otherworldly character, they are inevitably linked to this world. Beliefs are lived by people: they are

² It can be contested whether afterlife beliefs and eschatological fulfillment are fully otherworldly, as they are often related to people’s commitment to this world. Practices such as praying for the deceased also suggest a link exists between this world and the hereafter.

imagined, articulated and enacted (Day 2012; Venhorst 2013). Moreover, beliefs are shaped by specific circumstances and personal preferences (Stringer 1996). Thus, the changing role of religion in Dutch society has strongly influenced people's afterlife beliefs. Through the transmission of complex religious representations - like heaven, the soul, and resurrection - members of a religious community are endowed with vocabularies about life after death (Whitehouse 2004). The decline in church affiliation and (active) church membership has led to a decrease in routinising such detailed religious representations. As a result, we can observe fading religious vocabularies: a general decrease in traditional symbols of life after death - the adherence to formal religious beliefs concerning life after death decreased in the Netherlands from 56% in 1966 to 23% in 2015 (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016) - as well as the emergence of increasingly multivocal and altered interpretations of traditional afterlife images.

In addition to Christian religion, medical institutions and professionals were an important authority that shaped people's engagements with the deceased in the second half of the 20th century. Similar to many religious institutions, the medical and professional discourses emphasised the existence of stark and solid boundaries between the living and the dead (Howarth 2000). Dying, death and bereavement became secluded from the private sphere of everyday life and were increasingly engaged with in institutions. Furthermore, many professionals were working within a positivist and modernist paradigm that overlooked and marginalised the experiences of individuals. While religious beliefs allowed for the continuance of the deceased in the hereafter, from a psychological and medical perspective the dead were not supposed to play a prominent role in the everyday lives of the living. Although we can be sure that the deceased were socially present in the lives of the bereaved, the dominant societal norm understood active social relationships with the deceased to be inappropriate and / or pathological.

This sequestration of the dead conflicted with many (bereaved) people's needs and experiences, and already from the 1970s we can witness social movements that advocated to further death acceptance in society. Examples are the hospice movement in the UK, AIDS protests in the US, and euthanasia activism in the Netherlands. Questions of social equity and justice played an important role in these movements. In academic studies from the 1990s onwards, especially in psychology, sociology and anthropology, scholars began to revisit people's experiences of bereavement and inquiry began into the ways in which people continue social relationships with their deceased in their everyday lives (Valentine 2006).

In the contemporary academic literature, these *continuing bonds* have been normalised as a common engagement with bereavement (Klass and Steffen 2018), and many scholars have studied the diverse and multifaceted ways in which people continue social relationships with their deceased.

Bonds with the deceased can be transformed - both continued and discontinued - in varied ways, for example through the process of constructing a biography or self-narrative about oneself and the deceased (Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis 2014; Walter 1996; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2009), by creating, maintaining or moving (memorial) objects (Gibson 2008; Maddrell 2013), by visiting places that are associated with the deceased (Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou 2005), or by enacting ritualised practices with the mortal remains (Mathijssen 2018). Margaret Mitchell (2007) has illustrated that, generally speaking, people have seven motivations to negotiate the bonds with their deceased: 1) they seek to exert control over the situation; 2) they want to be faithful to the deceased, 3) they want to pursue a claim or campaign on behalf of the deceased; 4) out of guilt; 5) to seek revenge or retribution; 6) to make something good come out of a tragedy / out of death; 7) to hold on to a significant part of self. Thus the act of negotiating the bond with the deceased has social as well as psychological functions for the living in the here and now.

RELIGIOUS, BIOSOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

Although for most of the 20th century the notion of continuity was typically linked to afterlife beliefs in another realm or in a world to come, other ideas about the afterlife existed. Almost 50 years ago Robert Lifton and Eric Olson published a book called *Living and Dying*, in which they explore the psychological process of creating meaningful images in response to death. This process of symbolisation lies at the heart of what they term “symbolic immortality” (Olson 1974, 75), a concept that reflects the relational and imaginative nature of humans, and which contends that people create concepts, images, and symbols to transcend the individual self and participate in the continuity of life. By attaching themselves to their biology and history, people can experience that life continues in a meaningful way after death. In other words: they create afterlife beliefs in the here and now.

Lifton and Olson describe five ways in which people create a sense of symbolic immortality. In a *theological* way, people connect themselves to a principle of eternity and another plane of existence. *Biologically*, people continue their existence through offspring. Through *creativity*, people make

contributions of enduring value. A sense of immortality also emerges from connecting oneself to the ongoing rhythms of *nature*. And finally, people can encounter a sense of immortality when they experience an *experiential* psychological state. This categorisation into five modes has inspired me to revisit contemporary lived afterlife beliefs in relation to the idea of sustainability. It has led me to distinguish between three forms of sustainability that, as I will illustrate in the empirical part of the chapter, play a vital role in contemporary engagements with the deceased as they shape the practices, beliefs and experiences of individuals.

First, I distinguish *religious sustainability*. In contemporary practice the deceased is often connected to the principle of eternity via religious images, similar to the theological mode of immortality as described by Lifton and Olson (1974). Importantly, these religious images are situational: they are influenced by the specific context of the living, and shaped by personal preferences and experiences. In other words, religious sustainability in contemporary death practices relates not exclusively to traditional and otherworldly notions, but also to thisworldly ideas.

Second, I discern *biosocial sustainability*. The deceased's life continues through offspring, creating a sense of generational or biological continuity. Biosocial sustainability does not limit itself to offspring alone, but includes other social groups, varying from friends and acquaintances to nations and peoples. Such social connections are often created through acts, such as teaching, writing and inventing. During life people share experiences, and they can influence others by making "contributions of lasting value" that endure posthumously (Lifton and Olson 1974, 78). In his work on *Patterns of Transcendence*, David Chidester (2002, 12–14) points towards the reciprocity of this form of biosocial immortality: people may live on through progeny on the one hand, while the survivors, on the other hand, keep their deceased alive through ritual and social practice.

Third, I distinguish *ecological sustainability*. Contemporary understandings of immortality are often rooted in the ongoing rhythms of nature and the idea that the earth will continue to exist after we ourselves are gone. In view of climate change and concerns about the planetary future, the carbon footprint of funerary practices and the exploitation of deathscapes have become a growing concern (Olson 2016; Clayden et al. 2018). This also impacts on people's afterlife beliefs and understandings of the deceased, since "our conviction that things matter is sustained by our confidence that life will go on after we ourselves are gone" (Scheffler 2013, 81). Thus in

response to global environmental challenges, natural symbolism has become increasingly important in engagements with death and the dead (Davies and Rumble 2012). Beliefs about the deceased reflect dark ecological concerns, in relation to environmentalism, as well as light green preferences, such as a love for nature (Nugteren 2019; Taylor 2010). In ecological sustainability, the continuance of the deceased thus becomes linked to the continuance of the environment, and vice versa.

Each of these three forms of sustainability is common in contemporary engagements with the deceased, albeit in varied ways. What is important before illustrating this on the basis of empirical cases is noting that the religious, biosocial and ecological sustainability of the deceased are often expressed through material practices. People engage with objects of the dead, whether they are the product of the deceased's own work or otherwise associated with them, because objects have the capacity to provide a continuum beyond the individual life span (Mathijssen 2017). Moreover, objects provide a focal point for engaging with emotions and dealing with grief (Gibson 2008). In the 21st century, this material dimension is also increasingly digital: it can be shaped through social media platforms, online communities and other technological innovations (Kasket 2019).

METHODS

This chapter draws on fieldwork conducted in the death-care industry in the Netherlands between 2012 and 2016 (Mathijssen 2017). It is based on 15 qualitative interviews with recently bereaved people (between the ages of 34 and 84, who had up to a year previously lost an immediate family member) and 20 interviews with ritual experts (ministers, celebrants and funeral directors). The interviews followed a semi-structured guide, lasted between one and a half and two hours on average, and were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The bereaved people were invited to tell their story of losing a significant other, whereas the experts were invited to share their professional experiences. All interviews included the moment of death, the funerary preparations and practices, as well as experiences of bereavement. The relationship with and beliefs about the deceased were important interview topics. All participants gave informed consent for participation in the research project and the use of their interviews in academic publications. Their names have all been anonymised.

In addition to the interviews, I conducted participant observation in the death-care industry, especially of funerals, and in funeral homes and

crematoria (total of six months). I was invited to accompany different funerary professionals and, as such, was able to participate in and observe most aspects of organising and conducting a funeral. I kept a fieldwork diary and wrote notes during the observations, which were later analysed. Since 2016, I have continued to study and empirically engage with death-care professionals in the Netherlands on a regular basis. I also draw on these engagements in my reflections.

CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF RELIGIOUS, BIOSOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

This section explores contemporary expressions of the religious, biosocial and ecological sustainability of the deceased. In doing so, it draws attention to the increasingly thisworldly character of afterlife beliefs of recently bereaved people in the Netherlands.

RELIGIOUS SUSTAINABILITY

A 2015 national survey in the Netherlands showed that 23% of the population identifies with traditional Christian beliefs about life after death (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016), and in my interviews and participant observation I found that many research participants employed traditional religious images to articulate their understanding of the continuity of their deceased. Some of the people whom I interviewed were religiously literate and active church members in either Roman Catholic or moderate Protestant congregations, and they employed religious language to make sense of the continuing existence of their deceased. In doing so, many of them emphasised the otherworldly character of life after death:

I certainly believe in heaven. We only don't know what it will look like [...] In human terms I believe that it has to be something beautiful, but I cannot fill it in. Look, if the soul truly exists, and continues to exist after death, our human needs and thoughts that are part of this life do not fit in with it. (Gerrit, 84)

[...] perhaps I will meet [my husband] when I myself shall die. But in what way? You'll never know. We cannot possibly understand what kind of dimension that is. (Heleen, 66)

[My wife kept a text about Paradise in her hymnal, but I don't know what the hereafter will be like]. We can fantasise about it, but that doesn't change anything. You just have to let it happen to you. (Jan, 63)

In their accounts Gerrit, Heleen and Jan all portray the hereafter as something that is too mysterious and alien to grasp. If it has to be described in human terms, which they deem impossible, they see it as an utterly different but beautiful place. Specific terms such as heaven, paradise, and soul are used by the interviewees, but they are secondary to their shared description of the hereafter as the great unknown.

Although Gerrit, Heleen and Jan all affirmed the unknowable and thus otherworldly character of the afterlife, each of them also spoke about other ways in which their deceased continued to be present:

She is dead, but I don't feel like I have lost her. I only cannot touch her, hold her or brush her hair. (Gerrit, 84)

If you now think about how I've dressed this morning. This is my engagement bracelet. I thought, [my husband] will then be with us, with our conversation. And this is the golden brooch [of my sister]. [...] Well, and umm, this morning I thought [...] she had to be with us as well. And this is the ring from my mother. So I live a little ... but almost nobody knows. When I go somewhere I take these things along and they are with me. (Heleen, 66)

Factually, she is long gone. But... usually on Sunday, when I come home from church, I eat cake. We always used to eat cake [together] when we came from church. And now, I still take cake with coffee, and then I'm sitting there [pointing at the table] and then she is with me. (Jan, 63)

In the everyday lives of Gerrit, Heleen and Jan, the deceased maintain a social role. While this type of posthumous presence is not articulated in the same doctrinal way as the formal Christian beliefs, it is co-existing next to it. Gerrit, Heleen and Jan continue to share experiences with their deceased and involve them in their daily activities, including their lived religious practice. Jan, for example, also typically lights a candle next to a picture of his wife and *talks to her* after church, and Heleen had created a small altar in her home, where she keeps objects of and prays for her deceased family members. Thus both religious and biosocial beliefs enable the living to sustain their deceased, and these two categories are intersecting in everyday practice.

In addition to the co-existence and intersection of otherworldly religious beliefs and thisworldly biosocial engagements with the deceased, the narratives of many interviewees evidenced the fading of traditional religious beliefs. This was particularly evident among research participants who had distanced themselves from their religious community during their lives, but was also visible among interviewees who identified with some aspects of their religious tradition, for example church membership or life-cycle rituals, but who had rejected other aspects, such as the belief in God (Woodhead 2016). Their descriptions of the continuance of the deceased were influenced by religious sources but were simultaneously multivocal. Furthermore, they had otherworldly as well as thisworldly aspects:

My mother believed that she would meet [her loved ones] again. [And I also] think I will see them again. Now, I don't know if there ... Perhaps I got that idea from my Catholic upbringing. But I don't believe I will stand at a gate

...

[Something like a heaven?]

No, no, no ...

[And neither a hell?]

No, absolutely not.

[So it is not a negative thing?]

No, I associate it with birth. You don't know anything about the event yourself,

but it is still a miracle. So death will be something like that too. (Marja, 50)

Whether there is a life after death... I'll have to wait to find out. But the golden plates and spoons from the old days are no longer there. It is what they said in the past, you know, [but] I don't believe that anymore. [...] But whether there is an afterlife ... I don't know. [My husband] doesn't come back and he doesn't answer me. Sometimes I ask him to give me a sign or something, but no ... Nobody returns from it. (Elizabeth, 79)

I do not believe in heaven because it is impossible. It means you also have to re-encounter the people with whom you did not get along during life. You don't want such a thing. I believe it is like my husband says: that one dwells around somewhere as a blissful spirit. (Bettie, 84)

Each of these three accounts reflects a level of familiarity with traditional religious vocabularies: Marja speaks of standing at a gate, Elizabeth refers to golden plates and spoons, and Bettie speaks of heaven. While all three of them discard these beliefs as false, impossible or obsolete, they simultaneously draw on them in creating new images about the continuance of the deceased. Marja, for example, holds on to the idea that she will meet

her loved ones again, and relates this to the formal beliefs of her deceased mother. Bettie, on the other hand, emphasises that this is very reason why heaven cannot exist. Moreover, each of the interviewees links the continuance of the deceased to thisworldly images and practices. Marja creates an analogy with giving birth, which is described as a miracle, but which is also thisworldly and familiar. It is both unknowable and knowable. Elizabeth mentions her attempts to contact her husband, which suggest an implicit notion that he can reach out to her in the here and now, even though she indicates that he hasn't. Bettie, finally, says she believes in what her husband believed: that one dwells around as a blissful spirit *somewhere*. This notion of somewhere can mean anywhere, in this world or another. It is not an exclusively otherworldly category, like the traditional images that were described by Gerrit, Heleen and Jan.

BIOSOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The second and most common form in which the research participants expressed the continuance of their deceased was through biosocial sustainability. It was expressed in two dominant ways: in relation to offspring and in relation to broader social relationships. First, the idea that the deceased continue through *offspring* was profound. Not only did interviewees compare death to birth, as we have seen in the case of Marja above, but the existence of (grand)children enabled people to symbolically *and* literally sustain their deceased. This was expressed both in funeral rituals as well as in everyday practices. In funerals, for example, (grand)children often actively participated:

I always try to include children. In the last funeral [that I conducted], one of the grandchildren played the flute for their grandmother, the other the guitar. Usually I suggest to the family that the children can do something during the service, and this typically is the lighting of the candles. (Interview with celebrant.)

Children can thus be involved in many ways, for instance by lighting candles, playing music, reading a poem or placing flowers. While the meaning of these acts is typically stressed, for instance the symbolism of the light or the message of the poem, the meaning of the actors is equally important. The symbolism is also about *who* is doing the lighting, *who* is reading the poem, and *whom* the light or poem refers to. Thus through participation in the funeral, the biosocial connection between the deceased and their offspring becomes performed. Often, the mere presence of