

# Love and Imagination that Transcends Death

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## Introduction

All of the papers we have heard today have discussed the various ways in which Japan's ageing society has brought about a shift in the ways we understand life and death in Japan. From suicide to hospice care, this historically unprecedented demographic change has led us to question our assumptions about life and death as opposing or antagonistic forces, and to consider how they are intertwined in our social consciousness.

In this same spirit, I would like to present some research I have done on grief and bereavement among older Japanese adults. Through this presentation I hope to show that while looking at the current status of the low-fertility ageing society might help us rethink death, looking at death can also help us rethink the ageing society. In doing so, we might turn our attention to questions about the finality of death, its constitution as polluting and undesirable, and its negative effects on well-being in old age. My work suggests that for many, death is not a final separation, nor is it feared or detrimental to well-being. It may actually be a way of rediscovering the importance of lasting love in ways that can ease the transition to old age and enhance society.

In order to ground these considerations, I want to invite the participants to

consider two case studies of older bereaved women. Both women cared for their husbands in later life and have lived alone since their spouses' death. In each case, remembering the death continues to generate intensely emotional responses from the women. Yet these women continue to maintain bonds and a sense of communication with their deceased spouses through culturally meaningful ritual practices.

## Background

Much of the research on caring for older adults as well as the care of the dead has focused on adult children. This is in part due to cultural norms of filial piety and patterns of family inheritance based on the *ie* model. However, these values and the material and economic conditions that structured them have been changing rapidly since the mid-twentieth century. The low-fertility ageing society has resulted in fewer adult child carers and a rapid increase in spousal care in old age. Thus, if we are to try to imagine what ageing and end of life means in the future, we need to consider spousal relationships more closely.

I argue that in these cases especially, ritual practices ease fears around ageing, death and loss by allowing the bereaved to discover a sense of transcendence that extends subjectivity beyond death. The process of transcending death requires the maintenance of imagination, of a sense of the possible, or of envisioning other worlds. The power that maintains this imagination is love.

The cases I discuss here show that love, like death perhaps, is that which constitutes the self in relation to others. It is therefore culturally and historically situated, yet dynamic and adapted to individual circumstances, including age.

Love requires imagination insofar as it demands a response of concern for the well-being of the beloved. I imagine what my lover desires, and I try to remake myself into the object of that desire or into someone who can bring those desires to fruition. Anthropologist Lillian Kennedy (2017), who conducts research with persons with dementia and their carers argues:

What makes being a person in the world meaningful is the recognition of existing as such by intimate others [...] Therefore, we are made in the back-and-forth of familial life, in the reciprocity of care. In giving care and having that care received and recognized, we know ourselves to be a person.

This effort to mutually respond, or loving responsibility, does not necessarily diminish with the death of the beloved, as those who mourn well-know. It does, however, change its tone, deepening yet still shimmering in the shadows.

Love, as Lisa Stevenson writes, “allows us to care for ourselves and each other as imaginative beings” (Stevenson 2014: 174). This care is a reason to endure, to live for the sake of the dead. Several Japanese people I spoke with mentioned a desire to stay alive long enough to conduct periodic memorial ceremonies for a dead spouse, whereas in England, older people would be more likely to desire to stay alive long enough to see grandchildren grow up. Love may also be a reason to not fear death, since it is a chance to be reunited with the beloved in the other world.

Here I feel the need to clarify that I am using the terms ‘love’ and ‘imagination’ as analytical terms rather than as glosses for local idioms (see Ryang 2006). My Japanese respondents rarely used the word “ai” when describing their affections. Such a term would render love too abstractly. Instead, they spoke of a longing to see or speak with the deceased, and they spoke of their comforting sense of presence. These senses are grounded in rituals which provide a set of symbolic material anchors that allow the immaterial presence to be organised and woven into everyday life.

What my research suggests is that this uniquely human capacity for symbolic imagination, our ability to create stories that transcend what is and give us a sense of what may be, allows this reciprocity of care to continue beyond death. If death, as Judith Butler and others suggest can “undo” persons, then the imagination can “redo” them.

This is especially so in cultures with a tradition of ancestor memorial, where people are more culturally predisposed to imagine the agency of the dead. For

example, Bilinda Straight observes among the Samburu of Kenya, the entangled agencies of the living and the dead means “death erupts again and again into life, demanding the reimagining of social relations” (2008). The same kind of “undoing” and “redoing” of people and their social relations in death is mirrored in love.

Love can never be simply one thing. As Ursula K. LeGuin wrote, “it has to be made, like bread, remade all the time, made new” over the life course.

The deeper we look at death and love, the more they resemble each other. But I do not want to get lost in abstractions of Eros and Thanatos today. I am not a philosopher or a poet, but an anthropologist. For me, these ideas about love and imagination are based in the real stories of everyday people, and I believe they can help shed insight on what the ageing population might teach us not only about how to face death, but also about how to love.

## CASE #1 TERADA NORIKO

Psychological studies of family carers’ adjustment after bereavement agree that good relationships between carer and the cared-for prior to death is followed more often by acceptance and well-being after (Bass and Bowman 1990; Bonanno et al. 2002; Carr et al. 2001). Even if there was a good relationship before death, however, the circumstances of the death might cause feelings of regret or guilt that make it difficult to recover a sense of well-being. Ritual provides a meaningful narrative to integrate both the ongoing love of the deceased as well as the pain of bereavement.

This was the case of Terada-san, a neighbour of mine whose husband died only four months before we first met. She and her husband did not have a perfect marriage, but she giggles softly when she tells me how they met at the same factory more than 60 years ago. “It was a love marriage,” she explains, telling me it was still rare at that time.

Terada-san cared for her husband in her home for the last year of his life, when he was mostly confined to his bed. She fondly recalled the trips that they took

together, her happiness when she saw him smiling, and the ways they supported each other in hard times.

In the months before his death, when the care was most intense, her husband would often wake in the early morning and attempt to write a letter to her. She showed me a stack of these notes, each beginning with “thank you.” After that, he seemed to get confused, as if having difficulty remembering names or specific details. The writing became messier, and then the letter stopped. When Terada-san found these notes, she knew that he was writing to her. They never spoke about it, but the unfinished letters remain in a box in her house.

Terada-san told me that after her husband died, she became severely depressed, losing seven kilograms from her already small frame in just a few weeks. However, she added, on the memorial ceremony on the 49th day after the death, the monk conducting the memorial service tried to encourage Terada-san, saying “If you don’t take care of yourself, who will look after your husband?”

For some women, the idea that they would have to continue living in order to keep caring for their husbands might not be the most encouraging idea. But for Terada-san, who married her husband “for love,” the monk’s words resonated powerfully.

“So that’s what I do,” she told me, glancing into the next room where the new butsudhan stood. “I care for him the best I can.”

Some carers went even further in describing their relationship to the cared-for, explaining that the desire to care arose naturally because they were the same “life”, and therefore it was up to the “stronger” part to compensate for the “weaker” part. In doing so, carers were able to make a distinction between themselves and care-receivers, acknowledging the limits of empathic imagination and alterity, while at the same time, imagining both selves as the “same life” through the practice of love and care.

The responsibility for the care of the other arises out of this configuration of self and life as what Marshall Sahllins calls the “mutuality of being” (Sahllins 2013).

This was just as important in death as it was in life, and especially so for older bereaved carers.

I sat with Terada-san in her small home, facing her butsudā. The portrait of her husband, who had died three years earlier, was still placed in the center, and on the higher shelves, a memorial plaque bearing the inscription of his posthumous name, and another next to it, lettered in vermillion. It was just after the holiday of Obon, so I thought it was important to pay my respects. The funeral portrait was adapted from a photo taken during his last trip out with his family to a hot springs resort. It was the last trip they took together, and Terada-san always remembers it when she visits him now at the butsudā. And yet unlike the source photograph, the memorial portrait lacked contextual clues, rendering her husband present yet in some undefined elsewhere, ordinary yet other-worldly (Irizarry 2014, S163; Schattschneider 2003, 204). “He looks so nice in that picture, doesn’t he?” she said as she gazed up winsomely.

“I don’t want to put him in the grave yet. When I die, then we will both go together.” She giggled a little self-consciously at her sentimental, romantic gesture. “It is the same with our name” she added, motioning to the *ihai*. “When I die, my name will be colored in gold, just like his. We’ll be together then.”

Terada-san then started to move, telling me that she wanted to show me something. She bent down slowly, opening a small cabinet underneath the butsudā and removing a pale turquoise blue cylindrical shaped ceramic jar. It almost looked like a small cookie jar, I think, as she set it down between us and took off the lid to show me the bones of her husband inside. I was struck by how beautiful and delicate they were, like fragments of seashell, curved and broken into odd-shaped, yet gentle curves. “This is my husband” she said, as she picked up a small piece of paper that was resting on top of the bones.

She picked up the paper, and unfolded it. On it, she had written his posthumous name, the date, and her own name. Terada-san explained how on each year on Obon she wrote these notes, placed them in the jar and then on the

last day of the following Obon, she would burn them in her garden, hoping that the message and her thoughts would reach him somehow. She looked up at the photograph, still fingering the paper. She unfolded it and looked at it again. "Each year I write one of these and place it in here with him, and then on Obon, I burn it, right out here in the garden. It is my way of sending him a message."

On the opposite side of the small room was an empty space. This was where Terada-san cared for her husband on a special adjustable bed. In many homes of carers, these large adjustable beds were placed in the same room as the butsudan, as this was often the largest and most easily accessible room of the house. This was the case for Terada-san, and during our interviews she would often glance over to the spot where he used to lay as she spoke about him, as if imagining him still there. He no longer sat on that bed writing his love letters to her. Now was her turn to write notes to him.

## CASE #2 YAMADA

I met Yamada-san at a café near Kyoto University Hospital. She and her daughter took a table nearby and Yamada-san immediately lit a cigarette and sank back into her seat. After they ordered their coffee, Yamada-san turned and asked what I was doing. I explained that I was writing up fieldnotes from a visit to a care home the previous evening.

"Getting old is hard!" she said, her face growing grim, "I went to the doctor just now for my physical examination and I hurt my back!"

I winced a little and moved closer as she stubbed out the last half of her cigarette. Complaints about the body and mind were often one of the first ways older Japanese people I met would try to relate their experience to me. It was a way of setting the stage and performing age, but her narrative wouldn't end there:

"I went [to the doctor] because I want to climb Mt. Fuji in August— and I don't like being told no! So I won't quit!" She continued, "This will be my third

time. I went ten years ago, when I was 71, and before that when I was 70.”

Do you know the reason that I want to go this time? Well I was going to go a third time, but my husband said that he was worried about me, so I didn’t end up going. But last year, May, my husband passed away. So this time, I have decided to take his photo and climb Fuji-san again.

When he died, I really felt like there was no reason to go on living. It was better to die, I thought! I was really down. Until the 49th day anniversary ceremony, it was just really bad.

But when I figured it out, I felt my energy come back. Now I am living for this. Climbing Mt. Fuji with his photograph is my purpose in life.

Hiking and climbing mountains is a popular hobby among older people, especially those who are trying to prevent disability in later life. Miura Yuichiro is a household name in Japan after he overcame health problems to become the oldest man to climb Mt. Everest. However, Yamada-san’s goal to see the view from the top of Mt. Fuji with her husband, was not simply about exercise or achievement as an older person. It was also about the importance of performing care and loss as a means to move toward a more loving relationship to her dead husband.

Yamada-san’s story shows how love demands imagination. For the bereaved, death is not a singular event, but a lifelong process of wounding and healing. Yamada-san felt the wound beginning to heal after the 49th day, but her love demanded more. Gradually a plan took shape to take her husband to the mountain. But why Mt. Fuji?

When I asked Yamada-san, she smiled and told me “it was all thanks to the Grand Canyon”. Both Yamada-san and her husband worked all their lives, she explained, so after they retired, they took a vacation to the USA.

“My husband saw the Grand Canyon and he said that he felt that he should forget about all of his worries, all his feeling bad for himself, just think about living from that day on, taking care of each other. It was just so tremendous!



You look out and just see sky! We rode one of those little planes over it, and I couldn't believe how huge it was. So it was all thanks to the Grand Canyon."

She went on, gradually becoming more and more choked up as tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

"He's watching over me even now! The weather, when I have to do something and it looks like a little rain or something it will just clear right up. Because of Papa! I know that it is him watching out for me. So I am not going to give up on climbing Mt. Fuji. No way! I don't want to just be alive, right? You can't just do that. And I was all alone. I needed something to live for. It is really hard going up, but once you see the view, it is so incredible. So that's why I want to just keep going. Keep going."

Yamada-san did eventually make it up Fuji-san with her husband's photo, but not on the first try.

Weather conditions were poor, and the trip was harder than she was prepared to endure. Try as she might, she only made it to the 7th rest station before she and her daughter had to descend.

When she reached the bottom, feeling understandably disappointed, she noticed that a strange cloud had formed over the mountain, like a halo floating overhead. Yamada-san knew that it was more than just a random meteorological event. "When I looked up and saw the clouds," she wrote to me later, "I thought, 'Papa was feeling sorry that I came all the way to Mt. Fuji and I had to come down without seeing the top,' so he showed this to me, and I felt so grateful."

The following summer, at age 83, Yamada-san completed her ascent with the photo. After, she took another photo of herself, her daughter, and the portrait of her late husband.

What might we make of the link between care, mourning, and living on after

death? It may seem obvious that for Yamada-san, her mission to bring her husband to see the spectacular view from Mt. Fuji would not make sense without love and imagination. Her climb was a way of transcending death. Although dead, her husband was just as alive and capable of receiving care as she was.

Yamada-san could physically bring her husband back to the mountain, and through imagination, she would show how she was honoring the promise that the two of them made years ago looking out into the awesome expanse of the Grand Canyon. As with Terada-san, the image and ritual of memorial was important. The cultural symbols and narratives allowed her feelings to become practices.

But even more, she and her daughter created a new image with the three of them, a new memory of the memorial that could be shared and circulated, even to the curious anthropologist.

Looking closely, we see the picture within the picture, the one present in his absence, the one who endures without effort or exhaustion, the face that preserves in some way the vulnerability and its obligation. Not uncanny and alienated from the person, but an animated image, alive and able to accompany Yamada-san up the mountain. It is this face that initiates Yamada-san's actions, propels her to defy her doctors and daughters and to risk her life on the mountain.

Yamada-san no longer has the strength, much to her daughters' relief, to have another try at Mt. Fuji. Instead, she has taken up singing and karaoke to keep her spirits up. "When I see a country on TV where my husband I had been, or sing a song that I used to sing with my husband at karaoke, I still cry" she wrote to me.

"My husband was always saying 'You better not die before me!' So I have to whip my old body into shape and live for my husband's part as well. I am 83 years old. I don't know how much longer I will live, but I have decided that as long as I am alive, I will be positive and enjoy my life."

Her love for her husband continues to motivate her to live her best life in old age.

## CONCLUSION: Love and imagination in an ageing society

It may appear that I am suggesting, as John Lennon once did, that “All you need is love”, that the challenges of life and death in an ageing society like Japan can be adequately attended to if we were to just love each other more. Unfortunately, I do not think it is so simple. In the cases that I mention, love that transcends death was cultivated over many decades and had to first survive years of illness and caregiving. This love deserves our respect.

Discussing cases like these might help younger and middle-aged people to think about their own long-term relationships and to support their parents and grand-parents as they age. These cases might serve as role-models for older people struggling with grief. They might also help clinicians and religious groups offer grief counseling or spiritual care for older people who feel alone after a spouse dies. Older people can reconsider the pain of ageing and bereavement as a chance to rediscover a deeper sense of love.

In the era of a super-aged society, we need to diversify our narratives of old age and death. The polarizing narratives of successful ageing vs. decline, or resilience vs. pathological grief cannot capture the complexity of human lives, and may be more damaging than helpful. Instead, by starting from our unique capacities as human beings for love and imagination, we can support individual journeys and enhance society.

### ■ Note

The case studies in this paper were adapted from the chapter “Mourning and Mutuality” in *Companion to the Anthropology of Death* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).

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