

G R I E F A N D G R O W T H

A speculation on the future of death



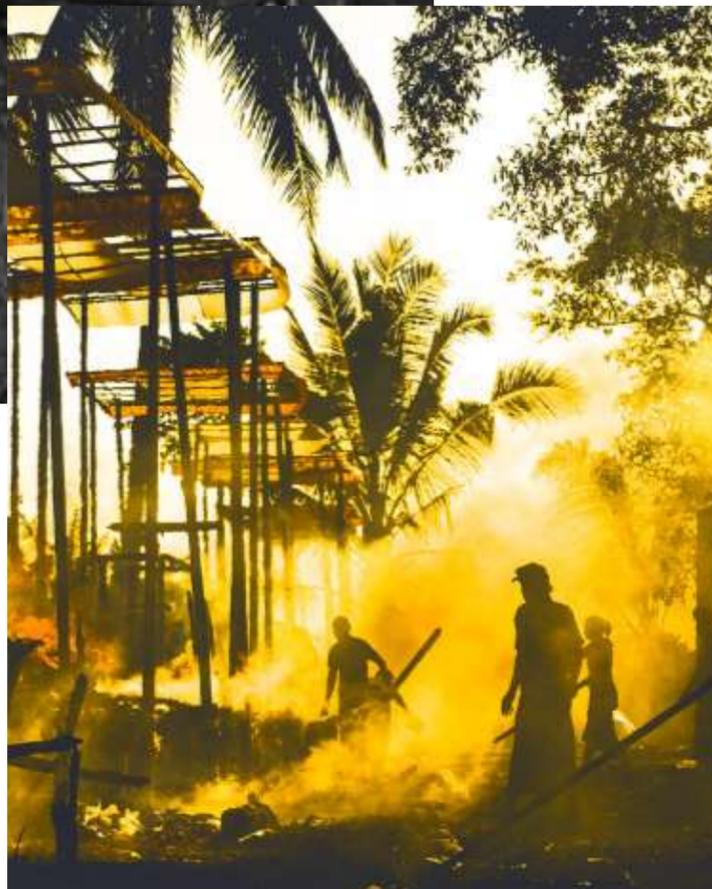
MATIJA BAROVIĆ
Design Innovation and Environmental Design
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Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. As king, you need to understand that balance and respect all the creatures; from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope.

But dad, don't we eat the antelope?

Yes, Simba, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass, and the antelope eat the grass. And so, we are all connected in the great circle of life.

The Lion King, 1994



INTRODUCTION

Death and dying are a natural part of life. One that every living being will inevitably experience. Throughout history, different cultures and philosophies have formed various rituals and practices surrounding death; from preparing to die, burial ceremonies, and monuments of remembrance, to expressions of mourning and theories about the afterlife.

I've always been open to talking about death. As an angsty teenager, I would often discuss it with my friends. Some people envision their dream wedding, but I've always had my fantasy funeral planned. I want it to be a wild party for everyone who knew me to laugh, eat, drink, and dance. I imagine everyone wearing fun outfits and celebrating. The tables turn when thinking about the deaths of others though. I imagine if someone I loved had a party like that, I probably wouldn't find it too easy to laugh and dance, even if that's what they'd have wanted me to do. Thankfully, I've not had many experiences with loss.

Still, death and dying remain one of my favourite topics of conversation. Talking about death, funerals, and what you think happens after you die can reveal a lot about a person. However, I often find people do not like to engage in this conversation.

At the beginning of the year, I thought my final project would deal with public space, bringing people together, and community engagement. When the pandemic was declared, suddenly death was everywhere, and it became hard to have light-hearted conversations about it like before. Death was constantly on my mind, so I decided to deal with that through my final project.

As a kid, finding out that burials cost money rubbed me the wrong way. I couldn't (and still can't) believe we're made to pay for something so out of our control. Besides, I personally don't need a lavish ceremony, I'm dead! Later I started considering the environmental effect of this excess, which made me even more resentful towards the system and lack of options it provides.

Given the current state of the world where we are forced to face death daily, and the spotlight recently shed on the redundant practices of contemporary society, I believe it is the perfect time to rethink how we collectively view and handle death and dying. In light of the inevitable cultural reset, economic downturn, and collective trauma that will surely follow this global pandemic, the intent of my project was to think of new, more appropriate, and more socially and environmentally sustainable death practices that are in line with the spiritual and cultural context, as well as the economic and practical circumstances of today's society. Through this project I researched how we might use space and practice to open up the conversation about death, help the bereaved cope, and commemorate the dead while honouring the spiritual and cultural practices of today in a sustainable fashion. I investigated burial rituals and emerging ways to commemorate our loved ones. Within the context of social sustainability, I've looked into funeral poverty and death inequality.

The end result hopes to provide more opportunities to form meaningful, helpful, and healthy relationships with death and grief. The project imagines a possible future death practice centred around sustainability and expanding into accessibility, conservation, grief, and shifting perspective about death (and life) using nature as a reference point.

THE STATUS QUO

Death, burial, and sustainability

A standard burial typically includes an embalmed body in a casket made of wood, metal, plastic, and/or rubber, surrounded by a concrete vault.

Toxic embalming chemicals are used to preserve the appearance of the body and slow decomposition (Albert Einstein College of Medicine, 2020). According to Erin Blakemore *“A traditional ten-acre cemetery holds enough embalming fluid to fill a small swimming pool”*. Along with varnishes, glues, and heavy metals from coffins, embalming chemicals are toxic for the environment when released into the soil and groundwater during decomposition (Jonker and Olivier, 2012). Embalming is not required by law in the UK as unembalmed bodies pose no health risks to humans, animals or plant life. On top of that, according to SevenPonds.com *“ten acres of a typical cemetery contain nearly 1,000 tons of casket steel, 20,000 tons of concrete in burial vaults, and enough wood used in coffins to build 40 homes”*. There are also many cases of graveyards reaching capacity and according to the BBC (McManus, 2015), the world is running out of burial spaces: *“Other countries in Europe, such as Germany, simply reuse the same grave space after several years. Families in Spain and Greece, meanwhile, rent a “niche”, an above-ground crypt where bodies lie for several years. When they have decomposed, the bodies are moved to a communal burial ground, so the niche can be used again. Venice’s San Michele island cemetery is similarly oversubscribed, with bodies removed after they have decomposed. And Israel has approved the creation of multi-storey underground burial tunnels, despite opposition from some Orthodox Jews. In more crowded parts of the world, cremation is the norm, but even finding space for an urn can be a challenge. In Hong Kong, thousands of families store ashes in sacks in funeral homes, while they wait years for a space in either public or private cemeteries. And in Singapore, one private company stores 50,000 urns, which can be automatically retrieved with an electronic card”*

Cremation is considered the more sustainable alternative to burial. Although this is true, it does not come without its detriments. On average, the cremation of a single body releases approximately 400kg of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. In addition to that, fire cremation expels a plethora of harmful fumes from burning tooth fillings, implants, clothes, and prosthetics. In 2005, mercury fumes from cremated tooth fillings accounted for 16% of the UK’s total mercury emission (Amar Kalia, 2019, The Guardian). Furthermore, cremation can cause practical struggles for families that do not know what to do with the ashes after they’ve been collected, while almost 250 000 urns remain unclaimed in the UK (Claire Brown, 2020, The Guardian).

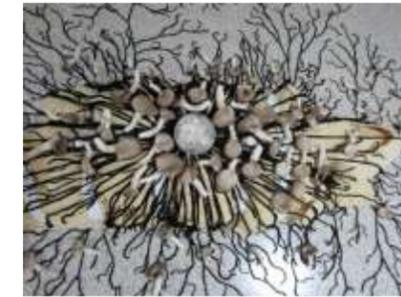
Fortunately, many greener options have been on the rise recently and new concepts are being developed.

Green burials are growing in popularity in the UK. According to Prof. Douglas Davies, leader of the Durham University Centre for Life and Death Studies, crematoriums and woodland burial sites are at roughly the same number (Kalia, 2019). These sites typically inter the body directly into the soil draped in a shroud. Sites may plant an indigenous plant, or install a marker at the burial spot, while some leave no marking at all. Natural burial sites are beneficial to the development and protection of woodland and wildlife as once a site is a burial ground, it cannot become commercially developed for any other purpose. They do not use any chemicals, pesticides, or excess water and resources for maintaining the lawn.

An alternative to fire cremation called “resomation” or “water cremation” is becoming more widely available in the UK. Resomation uses a superheated water-based solution to reduce the body to a calcium -phosphate “ash”. It uses a fraction of the energy required for fire cremation while significantly reducing emissions (resomation.com).

The concept I found most interesting was human composting, a method of disposal of remains which uses the natural process of organic reduction to produce usable compost. The process takes around 30 days to complete and the rich soil produced can be used to grow new life. The first human composting facility is scheduled to open in Washington State in the USA by 2021. *Recompose*, the company behind the idea claims that each person opting for human composting over cremation will save the Earth from approximately one tonne of CO₂ (Dockrill, 2019). This option is not yet available in the UK, although Katrina Spade, founder of *Recompose*, says there is growing interest (Ghosh, 2020). At the end of the process, the mourners are left with rich soil that they can take home and use normally.

Overall, the public seems to have growing awareness of the environmental effect of burials and cremation. The growing number of natural burial sites shows that it is something people will only grow more interested in. As the alternatives I’ve mentioned above are becoming better known, I believe there is reason to assume that their widespread availability is inevitable. As we adapt to more natural ways of handling death as a society, there is room to incorporate nature into the grieving process through new death practices and a shift in perspective.

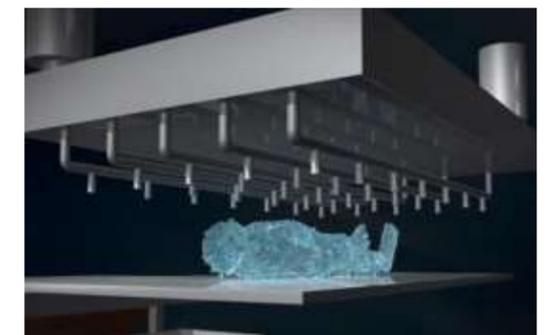


Mushroom burial suits by Jae Rhim Lee use a hybrid mushroom to clean and filter toxins from the body and redistribute nutrients to plant roots (TED, 2011).



Capsula Mundi is a burial system that uses biodegradable pods storing ashes or a whole body which is planted under a tree of the client’s choosing (capsulamundi.it).

Promession, by Swedish scientist Susanne Wiigh-Masak, which uses freeze-drying and soundwave vibration to turn the body into a fine powder which can then be buried and decomposes in 6 to 12 months (BBC, 2017)



THE STATUS QUO

Funeral industry

As we move towards new ecological ways of handling remains, which use less energy and resources, I assumed these methods would be more affordable and accessible to people than standard burial and cremation, however, this is rarely the case.

As of March 2019, The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has launched an investigation into the funeral market in the UK (GOV.UK). The reasons behind it are concerns of:

- *The rise in cost of organising a funeral, the essential elements of which have increased by 6% each year – twice the inflation rate – for the last 14 years. Funerals typically cost several thousand pounds which is a significant outlay for households.*
- *The vulnerability of many people when organising a funeral, which may mean that they are not in a position to look at a range of choices. This appears to have made it easier for some funeral directors to charge high prices.*
- *Reluctance of firms to publish/disclose clear prices, including online, or to provide comprehensive information on quality and range, making it difficult for people to compare funeral directors.*
- *Low numbers of crematoria providers in local areas, and difficulty for new companies to enter the market due to the planning regime and high fixed costs.*
- *High prices in relation to crematoria services – the largest private operators have implemented average price rises of between 6% and 8% each year for the past 8 years and some local authorities have also implemented large increases in fees.*

The typical cost of a standard cremation in the UK is £ 3,858 and a standard burial costs £ 4,975 according to insurance company SunLife. That is why, especially in the wake of COVID19 and zoom funerals, more and more people are opting for direct cremation, the cheapest being Simplicity Cremations at £ 995 plus additional charges. Many, especially older generations, are opting for prepaid packages, which freeze the price at the time of purchase to avoid inflation (Jones, 2020).

Public health funerals or “pauper funerals” for those who can’t afford a funeral are also on the rise. Depending on the council, there may be a service available, however the time and place is determined by the council. They are often buried in a joint, unmarked grave.

Those who cannot afford a funeral service may apply for assistance through the Social Fund, however this assistance is not guaranteed. Furthermore, the assistance offers £700 for funeral directors’ fees, an amount that has remained unchanged in over 10 years while the fees continue to rise annually (Wyatt and Strangways-Booth, 2015).

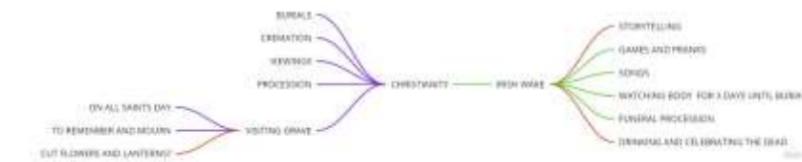
This look into funeral pricing, coupled with the perception that lavish send-offs and monuments signal respect, reveal the sad reality of people forced (financially or by expectation) to put a price on their dignity or, even worse, that of a loved one. This leaves many in financial troubles. Furthermore, one has no control over the inevitability of their death, meaning there is virtually no way to circumvent paying for your own death or that of a loved one.



SPIRITUALITY

Religion, tradition, and rituals

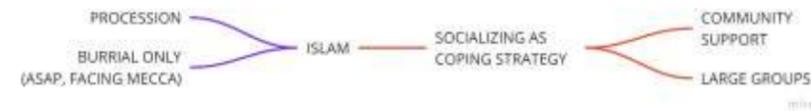
The main religions in the UK are as follows: “Christian (includes Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist) 59.5%, Muslim 4.4%, Hindu 1.3%, other 2%, unspecified 7.2%, none 25.7% “ (Central Intelligence Agency, 2020). There are various ways people commemorate death between and within religions, with some traditions being linked to specific areas of the country. I decided to look into some typical religions to find out what needs to be accommodated by the design, as well as to see what we can learn from how different people handle death and mourning. For this part of the research I did a general overview to get a sense of each and distil key points of interest:



(Kelly, 2016).; “Graveyards of Scotland” Nellie Merthe Erkenbach

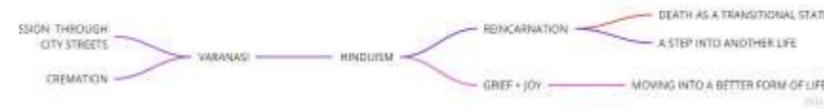
Christian traditions are different according to local cultures. Insights gathered from an analysis of a few of them show that the final design must incorporate space that is conducive to expressing grief in various ways, from quiet prayer or contemplation, to celebration and joy, without judgement. Community support, storytelling and reminiscing play an important role in the Christian mourning process.

On her blog “Graveyards of Scotland”, Nellie Merthe Erkenbach visits old graveyards around Scotland to learn more about the countries various local histories. As she says: “Graveyards are my way of experiencing the richness of Scottish history, connecting me to the region where I have the pleasure to live, with its past and its people. Graveyards tell beautiful, frightening and passionate stories of a nation.” Recounts of local traditions on her blog include song, dance, and drink. It seems to be common in many regions that all work stopped between the death and the funeral. Funerals are often paired with a wake either before or after interment. In her contribution to the blog, a reader recounted the story of her father’s death. They decided to move the body from Aberdeen where they lived, to Inverness, her father’s birthplace – an option that must be made possible in the design.

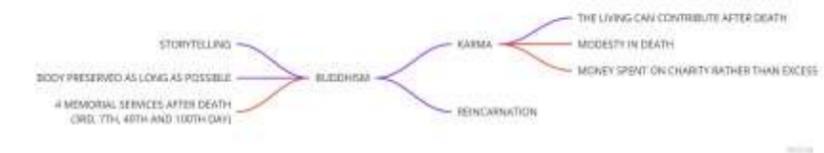


(Islamic Funeral Customs and Service Rituals: What you need to know., n.d.)

Muslim funerals are large events that can last days. Many people come from all over. Togetherness and support is crucial.

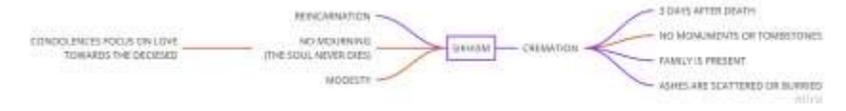


(“The Story of God With Morgan Freeman, ep1. Beyond Death”)



(A Guide to a Proper Buddhist Funeral, n.d)

In Buddhism, “Death is like lighting a candle with the flame of another”. Emphasis is on modesty and good deeds. Material riches are avoided, the money is rather spent on charity. This is not to say that ceremonies must be dull and empty, in fact Buddhist ceremonies are known to be colourful. Multiple ceremonies are held after death to pay respects and help the deceased’s karma. Legacy is immaterial: good deeds by the person in their life as well as those done after in their name. Merit and karma continue after death “(...) the earth represents the devotee’s store of merit: like the earth, one’s merit is always there to witness that one has done works of merit, even when there is no other living witnesses”.

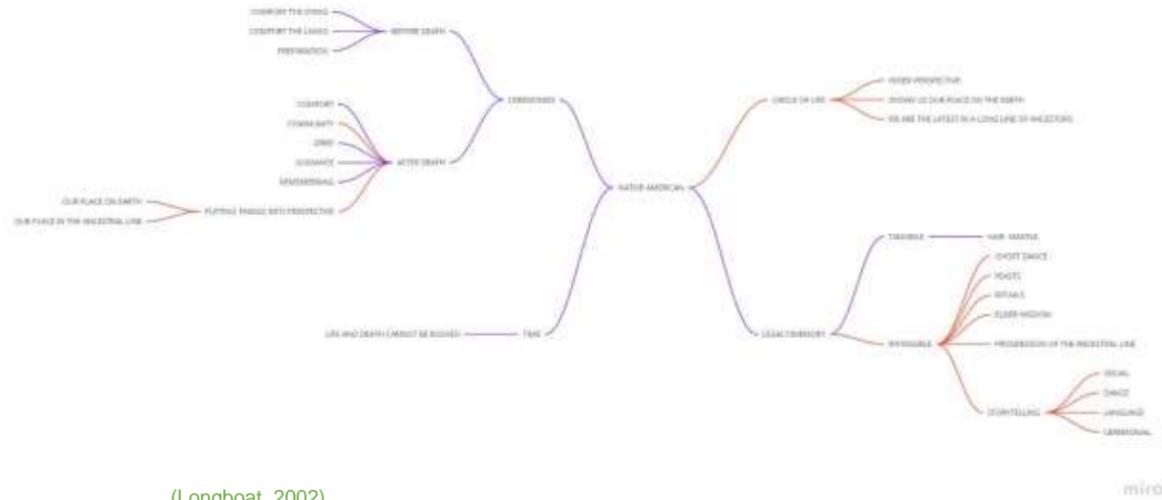


(funeralwise.com)

The lack of mourning or gravestones in Sikhism is an interesting concept to think about. Again, modesty in death is key. Personally, however, I would like to have my name written somewhere so that after everyone who knew me dies, someone might still stumble upon it and know that I was here. Similarly, ancient Egyptians believed that mentioning someone’s name extends their life and gives them power in the afterlife.

NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE

Perspective: natural and ancestral contexts



(Longboat, 2002)

Native Americans (Anishnabe (Ojibway) and Haudenosaunee (Iroquis) tribes) emphasize perspective: viewing the self as part of nature as well as the result of a long ancestral line. I believe viewing ourselves this way might help today's society better cope with death, as well as increase appreciation for nature and other people. Seeing ourselves this way gives a wider context. It shows us as a part of a larger picture. Native Americans value the individual, but also emphasise a collective mentality. Legacy is again immaterial, passed down through wisdom, rituals, and ceremony.

OTHER INTERESTING CUSTOMS

Some other examples from around the world stand out to me because they have strong elements of storytelling woven into them. Some of them tie the story to nature, some to the person's life, and some to ancestral lineage.

They show that death practices are a product of culture, geography, and heritage, and are often a mix of various, seemingly contradictory, concepts and beliefs. This is to say that as societal contexts evolve, so do customs.



Tibetan Buddhist air burials, where bodies are left to be eaten by birds



Jazz funerals (New Orleans) are a mix of West African, French, and African-American traditions. They stood out to me for their combination of celebration with mourning



The Cavite people of the Philippines bury their dead in hollowed out tree which the dying person chooses



Ghana is known for fantasy coffins shaped and styled into an object that marked the deceased person's life



In Croatia, on All Saints Day, Christians all visit the cemetery, to light candles and leave flowers. It's a very sentimental day and families typically come together for a meal and often tell stories about lost loved ones. The custom is, however, very wasteful as it leaves behind vast amounts of disposable plastic lanterns

NATURE

Conservation efforts and systems in place

While researching the state of nature in the UK, I explored various charities and organisations that conserve, maintain, and develop the UK's nature and wildlife.



The primary dedication
to the UK's nature and wildlife.



Ash koruwa jewelry, small



Bees biodegradable urn, small



Bees biodegradable urn, large

I found The Woodland Trust to be the one most relevant to my project as they offer some death-related services, which they use to gain revenue to support their work.

The Woodland Trust works on restoring woodland, and there are partner agencies (State of Nature Partnership) working on conserving and restoring all types of natural areas in the UK. Just in the example of native rainforests, the State of Scotland's Rainforests report (Woodland Trust Scotland, 2019) reveals that all in all, there are just over 30,000 hectares of rainforest remaining in Scotland, which makes up only 21% of the land that is fit for rainforest biodiversity. Even though they host as many types of tree and shrub species as larger patches, most patches of rainforest are quite small and far apart, which makes them more vulnerable to damage and clearing, as well as the less humid climate outside the forests. The report also states that: *"Creation of more native woodlands, by planting and encouraging natural regeneration around and near to existing rainforest sites on the west coast, will result in a larger, and therefore more resilient, national rainforest resource."* and that *"We also need to make the most of opportunities to reconnect people and businesses to the rainforest to make sure it is contributing, where appropriate, to sustainable livelihoods."* To sum it up: there is much work to be done, however finance is a struggle.

In "The Current State of Ancient Woodland Restoration" report by the Woodland Trust (2018) it is stated that there is great uncertainty regarding the nature and amount of future support in restoring PAWS (plantations on ancient woodland sites, meaning woodland sites planted with non-native species) to ancient woodland, especially following Brexit. The report suggests that alternative ways to fund this effort, such as crowd or community funding, or Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes, should be explored.

The 2019 State of Nature report by the State of Nature Partnership emphasizes the importance of connecting or reconnecting people to nature. This doesn't mean simply getting people outside. It means forming a meaningful emotional connection through the senses, learning, compassion, and drawing people's attention to nature and its details. The goal of connecting people to nature is creating a lasting relationship that helps people view themselves as belonging to nature. It aims to achieve connectedness, freedom, oneness, and compassion. In order to successfully work on the restoration of nature, the public must be made aware of the issues it faces and feel empathy towards the Earth.

Another aspect to take into consideration is the coronavirus pandemic. During lockdown, people all over the world have noticed nature starting to thrive, and appreciation for nature has grown. In the UK, in an Oxford University working paper (Hepburn, C., O'Callaghan, B., Stern, N., Stiglitz, J., and Zenghelis, D., 2020) exploring the possible effect of the COVID-19 recovery packages on the progress of climate change, the researchers find that green recovery packages are more economically and ecologically sustainable in long-term.

The UK public also seems to be supportive of the idea. The Climate Assembly UK (a group of 108 UK citizens selected to represent the public) stated that they think green recovery packages and continuing some of the lifestyle changes adopted in lockdown would be generally well received by the UK population (Harvey, 2020).

My research into this aspect of the situation shows that there is interest and potential in partnering with some of these organisations and utilizing PES in addition to services related to death. Given the time constraints and the fact that I am not well versed in business, I regretfully did not manage to work out exactly how something like that would be done. I've tried to get in touch with these organisations in hopes of a collaboration, but unfortunately to no avail. However, the preliminary insights into this area show that there is opportunity to build upon. In my design, I will use the knowledge I have and informed assumption to explore how a new system might work.

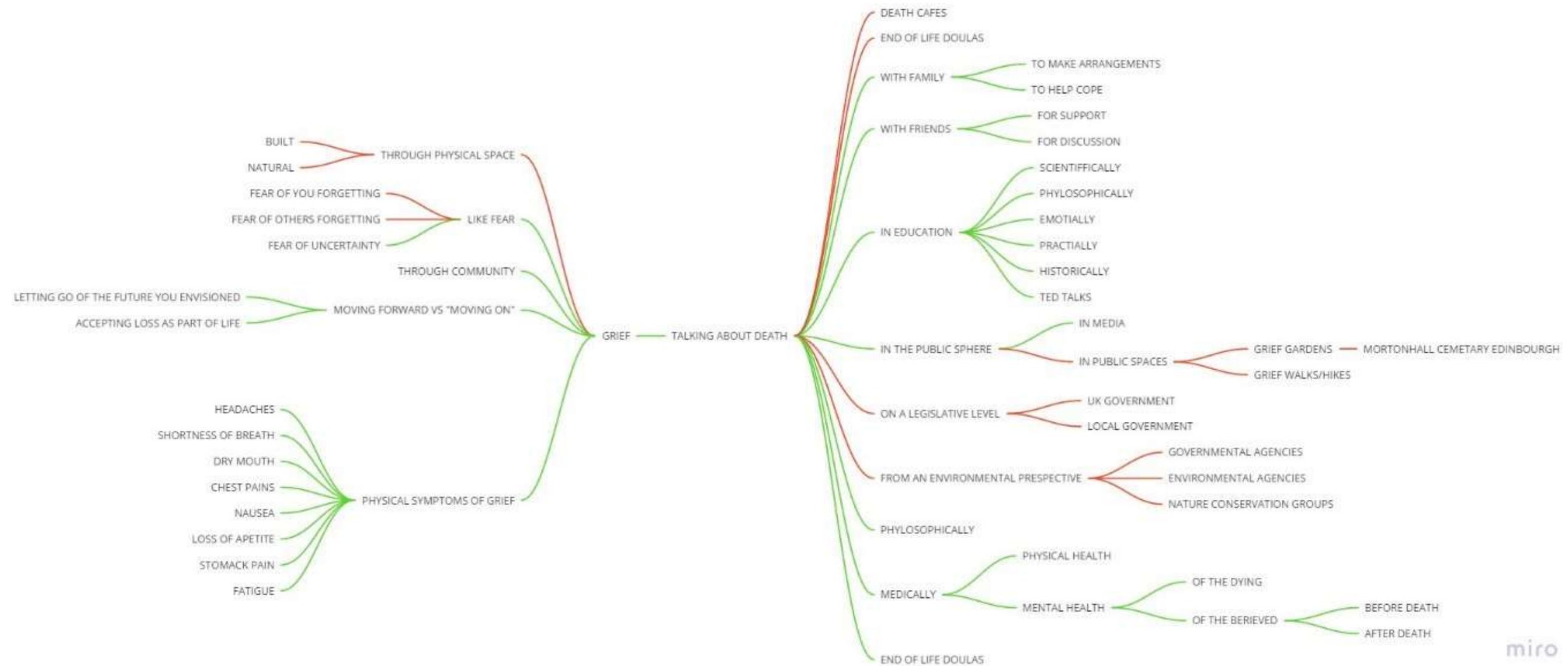
PES schemes are defined in the *Payments for Ecosystem Services: A Best Practice Guide* (2013) by The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as follows:

"PES schemes involve payments to the managers of land or other natural resources in exchange for the provision of specified ecosystem services (or actions anticipated to deliver these services) over-and-above what would otherwise be provided in the absence of payment. Payments are made by the beneficiaries of the services in question, for example, individuals, communities, businesses or governments acting on behalf of various parties. Beneficiaries and land or resource managers enter into PES agreements on a voluntary basis and are in no way obligated to do so."

Ecosystem services, simply defined, are the benefits we derive from the natural environment. These include, for example, the provision of food, water, timber and fibre; the regulation of air quality, climate and flood risk; opportunities for recreation, tourism and cultural development; and underlying functions such as soil formation and nutrient cycling. Maintaining and enhancing ecosystem services – and restoring them where they have been lost or degraded – is increasingly recognised as essential for sustainable economic growth, prosperous communities and promoting peoples' wellbeing."

GRIEF

Talking about death and grief management



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When researching attitudes towards death and grief, I looked into multiple types of sources from reports, talks and articles, to media and art. I've then mapped out the insights I've gathered.

GRIEF CONTINUED

I started by reading articles and watching TED talks by various grief experts containing their advice, personal recounts on forums like reddit, or videos of people describing their experiences on YouTube. I watched interviews with people in palliative care and people thinking about their own death or planning for it. I've also watched documentaries, tv series, and movies that handle death, and took special notice when death was mentioned or shown in the media or while scrolling through social media. I've also looked into topics similar to loss (shock, trauma, post-traumatic stress, material loss, big life changes, loss of relationships) in the same way. The reason why I chose to investigate mostly subjective, qualitative data is because, even though Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), those stages come differently to each person. In situations similar to those of experiencing loss, people often cope similarly (with some differences in place, specific method etc.).

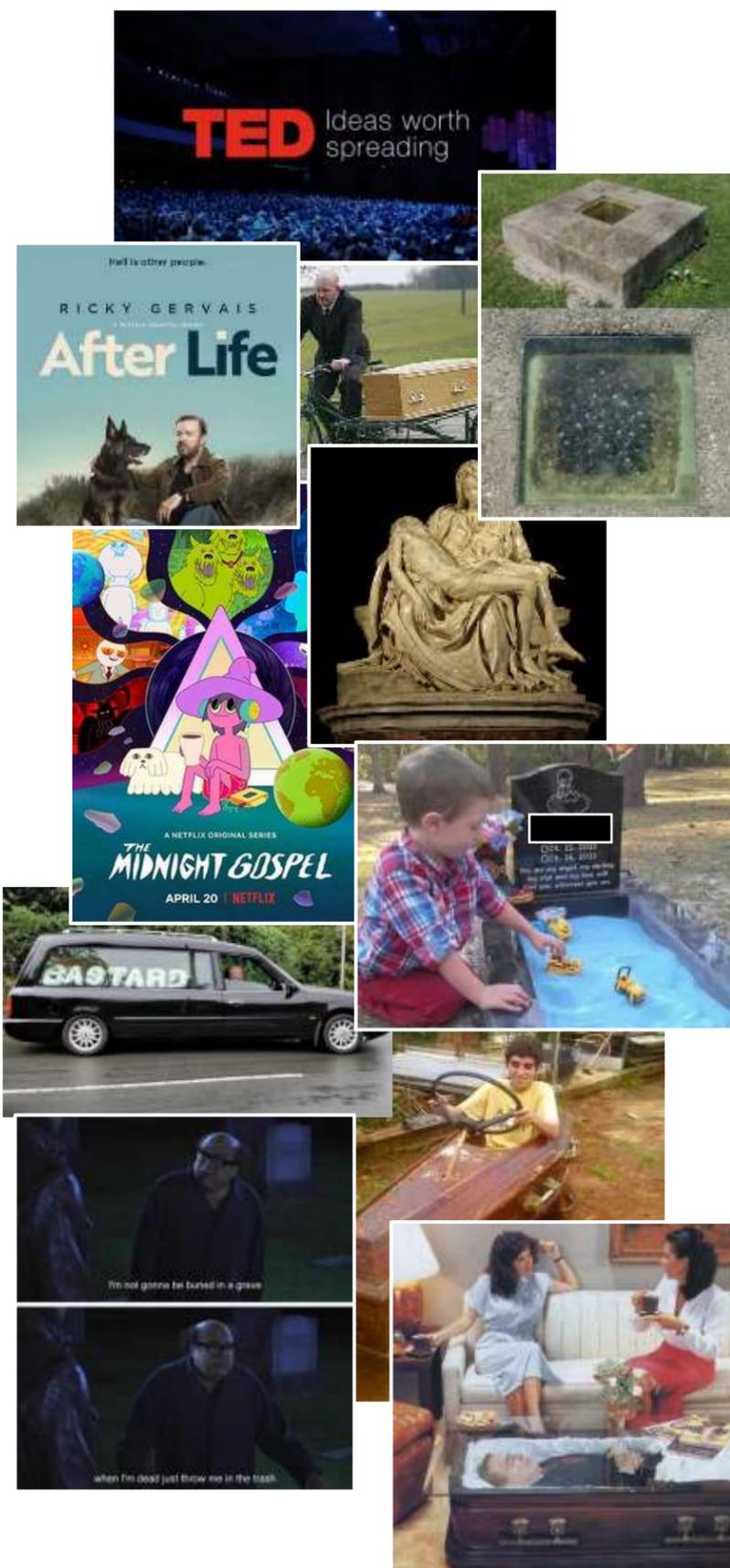
In the many TED talks about loss, a key theme emerges: "get over it". People seem to have a lack of understanding when it comes to grief. They don't realise that "getting over it" isn't possible. Rather than "get over it", the realistic and healthy option is to accept and move forward with grief. Missing someone you lost is not a bad thing and getting sad now and again is normal and healthy, no matter how much time has passed.

I've investigated talking about death at The Order of the Good Death, a death acceptance organization founded by mortician and author Caitlin Doughty. I've also taken a look at her YouTube series "Ask a Mortician". She believes death is not talked about because we don't see it anymore.

Now, with the Covid19 pandemic, death is even more predominant in public consciousness. During lockdown, Death cafés, virtual or real-life places where people gather to casually talk about death, are rising in popularity. Whether it is their own death, planning for the approaching death of someone else, or the emotions that follow loss, community support in an open-minded atmosphere can be extremely helpful.

A further discovery was the concept of death doulas, volunteer carers helping those affected and their loved ones cope with terminal illness and prepare them for their end of life. They offer support and knowledge regarding options, terminology, and technicalities, as well as the emotional and spiritual needs of those in their care. I was very intrigued by this concept as I've never heard of it before and found that when I mentioned it to my friends and colleagues in conversation, they had never heard of it before either. To find out more about it, as well as to get real-life examples without contacting vulnerable people, I interviewed Lizzie Neville, chair of End of Life Doula UK.

Lizzie started as a death doula organically when one of her friends was dying and others found it hard to have honest conversations about it with her. She says recently, the organisation's popularity has grown both in numbers of volunteers and clients, who come from all walks of life. However, it might take another 10 years before it becomes commonplace. EoLD UK also engage with communities through workshops to raise awareness of their organisation and the importance of talking about death. Ideally, a doula would come into a family about six months before death and stay with them for a while after to help them transition, though it's different in each case. In their practice, they never suggest – only present options. Her experiences confirmed and expanded many of my insights from before.



INTERVIEW

Lizzie Neville, Chair of End of Life Doula UK

People are confused about the steps they need to take when handling dying and death

All the planning and finances that go into the end-of-life process are overwhelming, preventing them from dealing with their loss in a healthy way and adding to the stress

- *“So most people focus on funerals and wills, so funerals or money, and actually they forget about themselves (...) what they really want, and if they can't talk, or they don't have the mental capacity, that (issue) goes to the family. And that's quite hard. And that affects the family really badly.”*

The process is specific to each family, there are no right or wrong ways to handle death. Openness and a non-judgemental attitude are important – people may feel guilty to express healthy and normal emotions because they're not taught these are normal

- *“(...) we're not confined to doing it a certain way. It just flows. And it's different with every family or every person that you work with. And sometimes we don't even see the person who's dying. It could be that we're just working with a family and supporting the family at their side. So- and just, you know, giving them the space to be able to say: "This is horrid. I hate it. Right now, I don't like that person." and there's no guilt and there's no judgment from us because when somebody's being horrid, whether they're dying or not, they're being horrid. And, you know, yeah... So it's a safe place for people to go and be able to be honest and say what they need to say. Once they've got it off their chest and like, take a deep breath, "I can go back and I can do more.”*

Before death, people tend to suddenly realise the immensity and physicality of nature

- *“But once you're told, you know, the finishing line, it's suddenly like "Woah!" so you will get a lot of people outside feeling the wind, watching the trees, smelling the grass... I know it's clichés, but it's true, they do do that. And a lot of people will say when they're dying that they want to be near a window, or if their bed can be taken outside to get outside, all sorts of bits. So, we're very, very aware with that. Or sometimes the sea, the sea is really important to people. And we'll try and get them down there. Or we bring in visuals”*

Funeral homes use confusing and misleading language, possibly deliberately

- *“I'll also talk to them about words that funeral directors will use that might make you think, oh, gosh, I need to have that. (...) "Hygienically cleaning", that's what they call it. A lot of people don't realize that a hygienic clean is actually embalming.”*

Some people plan in advance, but some choose the first option they come across

- *“They'll look in their paper and literally find the first advert and just ring the first one they come across. Yeah, it's- I ask people to do their homework and just find one they're really comfortable with. I always say to them, "Ring them. Ring them and have a chat with them and see. See how you feel with it.”*

Mourners are often alienated, and after some time, expected to be completely “over it”

- *“And you quite often find the person, the main person whose loved one has died, ends up being on their own quite a lot because people don't quite know what to say. And so once they've said: „Oh, I'm really sorry, and it's, you know, blah, blah, blah” give them a kiss and a hug, they walk away and they're just sort of left stranded (...) And actually, people's grief doesn't really start, well, I mean, you can start from day one, or you can start before the person's died. But it could be two or three years before it really kicks in. And then, you know, most people like "Well, that happened ages ago, you should be over it by now. " Like, nope. Still processing. So yeah, people aren't really very supportive in grief. Just because we just don't understand it.”*

Being in nature, physical activities, and sensory experiences are powerful tools for healing

- *“Digging! Digging is really good for grief and that, anything physical energy, so yeah, lots of walks that we will go out for, lots of walks. Help them you know, if they can't go very far then we might get some plants in and help them do some pots of- getting your hands into the dirt. Getting dirty hands with it all and just getting back to nature. It's all the simple things that people need. And that grounding. It's all about grounding really. And in simple things like taking your shoes off, shoes and socks off, walking on grass and just feeling it. You know, some people think it's weird, but actually it works quite well.”*

Awareness and openness about death practices is on the rise

Touch is important – this is exacerbated by Covid-19

The process is often rushed, which is counter productive

- *“And very much in this society it is: the person dies, and if you're in hospital, or they've stopped breathing "Let's call the nurse." Don't call the nurse, okay? "Right. Well, you all step outside. And we'll just make them look nice. And then you can come in and say goodbye." So, um, they might give you a cup of tea, but you've got like 20 minutes and you've got to get out of the way while they, you know, wash the body down or whatever. And so, doulas are very much "Okay, person's just died. Let's just sit here because you're never going to get this time again. And this is your time to be private and to say your goodbyes and your connections and wish them well on their journey and all the rest of it. And if you want to sit there for two hours or three, that's fine." And so we don't rush it. And then we say to them "Do you want to wash the body down?" and we can make quite a ceremony of it. Well, it may be that they will sit at the side and let us do it. And then the doulas will come in and wash it down. And you'll find, after a while, that somebody might stand up, and they might come in and just say, "Oh, well, you know, pass me that cloth. I think I can just dab their hand." And, you know, while we're doing it, we're talking to the person who's just died. And we're also talking to the family and saying "Oh, you know, these hands, that, you know, they must have cooked you many dinners" or something like that, you know, it's just bringing those memories in and, and, you know, we make a ceremony of it and make it gentle. And you know, that can include- so lots of nice oils, there'll be like rose petals. You know, when we've wrapped somebody up, we'll make it so it's gentle (...) But if they've died at home, obviously we say to them “You don't need to ring them yet” or to ring them and say “The person's died but I don't want you to come collect them until tomorrow. Obviously you've got to get the doctor in to certify the death and all of it, but yeah... We're always like “Take it down a step, you don't have to rush with any of this at all.” Because we do, we all rush, we all pick the phone up, you know.... And it could be the person's died at 9 o'clock, by 10 o'clock they're out the door, gone. It's too quick.”*

Another important insight she gave me was a story of a family that decided to do everything themselves, from picking up the body from the hospital, to building and decorating the coffin and taking it to the crematorium. She says that not only was it helpful with processing the situation, it also got the whole family involved and helped them heal together.

My conversation with Lizzie deepened my understanding of the whole picture. She also introduced some things to further explore: mindfulness and meditation, DIY possibilities, and EoLD as a community resource, rather than just an individual one. Lizzie and I kept in touch later and she helped me with some quick questions via email. She also confirmed that an idea I had later on about grief walks could be easily adopted by EoLD across the UK.

WELLBEING

Grief, nature, and mindfulness

When thinking about the connection between grief and nature, I encountered the concept of grief walks. Grief walks are organized walks where people who grieve come together to support each other, even silently as no one is encouraged or discouraged to share. That way no one is put on the spot as they might be in a group therapy session. In the examples I've read about, the participants feel very strong positive feelings about the concept (Barton, 2011). Walking and spending time in nature are known to be good for physical and mental health. Walking also helps us think, in fact there are links to walking (especially in nature) and improved memory and cognitive abilities, and helps us think creatively (Opezzo and Schwartz, 2014) (Berman, Jonides and Kaplan, 2008).

My conversation with Lizzie also made me think about mindfulness, being in your body, and the sensory experiencing of nature. To find out more about mindfulness, I watched two seminars by the Zen Caregiving Project, one by Mary Doane on *Working Mindfully With Grief* and another by Irene Smith on *Mindful Touching as a Means of Comfort*. Mindfulness is the practice of being present in the body. It is best practiced in short regular intervals and can be incorporated in small ways into everyday life. Focusing on your body and physical sensation can help people get out of their minds and into their bodies, breaking the cycle of rumination that often comes with grief, even if only for a moment. The exercises presented, however, focused on breath, which for me personally brings up the weird sensation of no longer breathing automatically. After a pandemic especially, focusing on breath might be a source of anxiety for many as it is for me. If I were to incorporate mindful exercises in my design, I feel focusing on breathing should be avoided. Rather the focus might be on tactile experiences by the body.



Comforting touch



Grief walks



Sensory experience of nature



IDEATION

Distinguishing key points of interest and possible directions

After gathering a wider picture of the current state of the funeral industry, religion, and nature in the UK, various cultural death practices, meditation, and personal recounts of death and grieving, it was time to distil which of those were of most importance and what aspects I found crucial.

Native American Rituals Irish Wake
 Islam Hindusim Buddhism Balinese cremation
 Air Burials Reincarnation Sikhisim Grief
 Circle of Life Funeral poverty Environmentalism
 Ecological grief Social sustainability
 Conservation Green burails Turning of the bones in Madagascar
Death Doulas Mindfulness
 Aboriginal funeral rites Funeral industry
 Dia de los Muertos Ghana fantasy coffins
 Caviteño tree trunk burial New Orleans Jazz Funerals

Storrytelling Rituals Community Gentleness Individualism
 Personalisation Disclosure Time Wisdom Ancestral line
Touch Senses Therapy Perception
 Rememberance ceremonies Perspective Self-care
 Grounding Body Inclusivity Equality Legacy
 Intagible Celebration Empowerment Nature Dignity
 Humility Charity Knowledge Development Karma Fear
 Education Guilt Space Shock Legislation Acceptance
 State of mind & body Rebirth Nurturing Benefit
 Health Conversation Growth Memory Context

After the analysis it became clear to me that the project has shifted from its initial starting point of sustainable death practices, into a holistic new way of handling death as a society. It has become about shifting perspective; viewing life and death through the lens of nature.

My goal is now to create an experience that helps us heal from grief and be less afraid of death by internalising that we are all part of the circle of life. If a loved one dies, and the soil from their body is used to grow new life, saying things like “My grandfather is an oak tree” instantly humanises nature and in turn strengthens our connection with it and heightens our empathy towards it.

The design outcome must then be able to firstly get people comfortable with a new practice, and then gradually shift the mindset into a new way of thinking.

When trying to incorporate these into a tangible design, the first thing I thought about was space. Monuments play a big role in our understanding of time and history. The space should be different from a regular natural area or public space. It should also be able to accommodate rituals such as funerals, and actions like visiting, wandering, resting, and meditating. It should be serene and dignified while letting people do whatever they need to express their grief.

Markings like gravestones make tangible the number of people that came before us. Visiting graves is a ritual that comforts us by reminding us that our loved ones and their names will be remembered long after everyone they knew is gone. Leaving flowers or wiping down a gravestone makes us feel like we’ve done right by the person, they are tangible actions that console us in knowing that we’re taking action to remember them. When flowers and lanterns are taken out in a leave-no-trace practice, we will still need a place to express gestures towards the dead.



Gestures and actions



Memorial spaces

open – temporary – enclosed – collective - individual

Seeing as grief is unique and deeply personal, the new experience should be able to be personalized. Aside from appearance, what information should be available? Digital headstones already exist, but should technology be used? A prototype test which my colleague Aline Jarneau shared with me has shown that people think a headstone is not the place to display information, but that the idea of being able to learn more about someone would be intriguing (Häkkiälä, Jonna & Colley, Ashley & Kalving, Matilda 2019).

In terms of social sustainability and affordability, what could be done to bring down the costs of dying so that a dignified and meaningful experience can be available to all? One way might be to utilize nature preservation infrastructure and PES schemes. Another might be to have the option of doing some or all of the steps yourself, which might also bring comfort in taking action by doing something for the person you lost. "Payment" could also be done via volunteer work and donations. Whatever this exact system might look like, it should combine all these options in a holistic way, keeping the mindset of healing, connection to nature, growth, and reciprocity. Emphasis should be on the client and their wellbeing.



Gestures and actions





“From my rotting body, flowers shall grow, and I am in them, and that is eternity.”

Edvard Munch

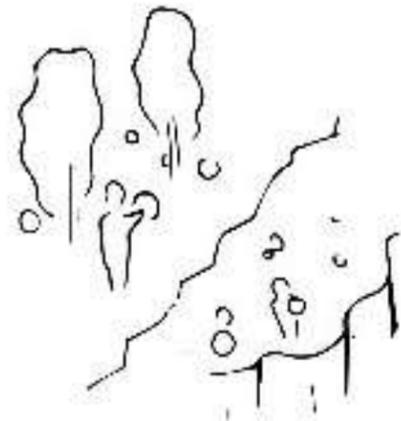
G R I E F A N D G R O W T H

D E S I G N O U T C O M E

MEMORIAL GROUNDS



Whatever the actual form of the memorial markings, the space and atmosphere should be serene. The visual aspect should stand out to signify meaning without being imposed on the landscape. The question remains whether the markings should be clustered or spread out through a natural area considering humans possibly disturbing plant and wildlife. Exact locations also need to be determined based on this, as well as the local context (need, interest, numbers etc.). When mindful of natural habitats, the design could be implemented on smaller scales depending on individual needs (e.g. a small number of markers in remote, sparsely populated areas). As the recomposed soil can be divided, markers could be placed on multiple sites if desired.

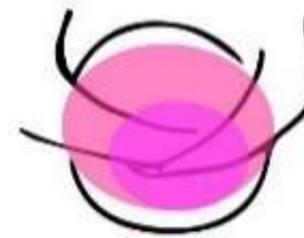


MEMORIAL MARKERS

Ergonomics must be taken into consideration of the shape. It must be conducive of a variety of gestures.

Material, colour, texture and durability are crucial factors. The object should be comforting to the touch as well as the mind, and it must stand the test of time.

Other than memorial markers, one could be able to make a custom container/planter/tree marker to use when collecting recomposed soil, or urn for when one opts for cremation or aquamation. The look of the objects can be created using colours/textures personalized for the deceased.



Ergonomical possibilities

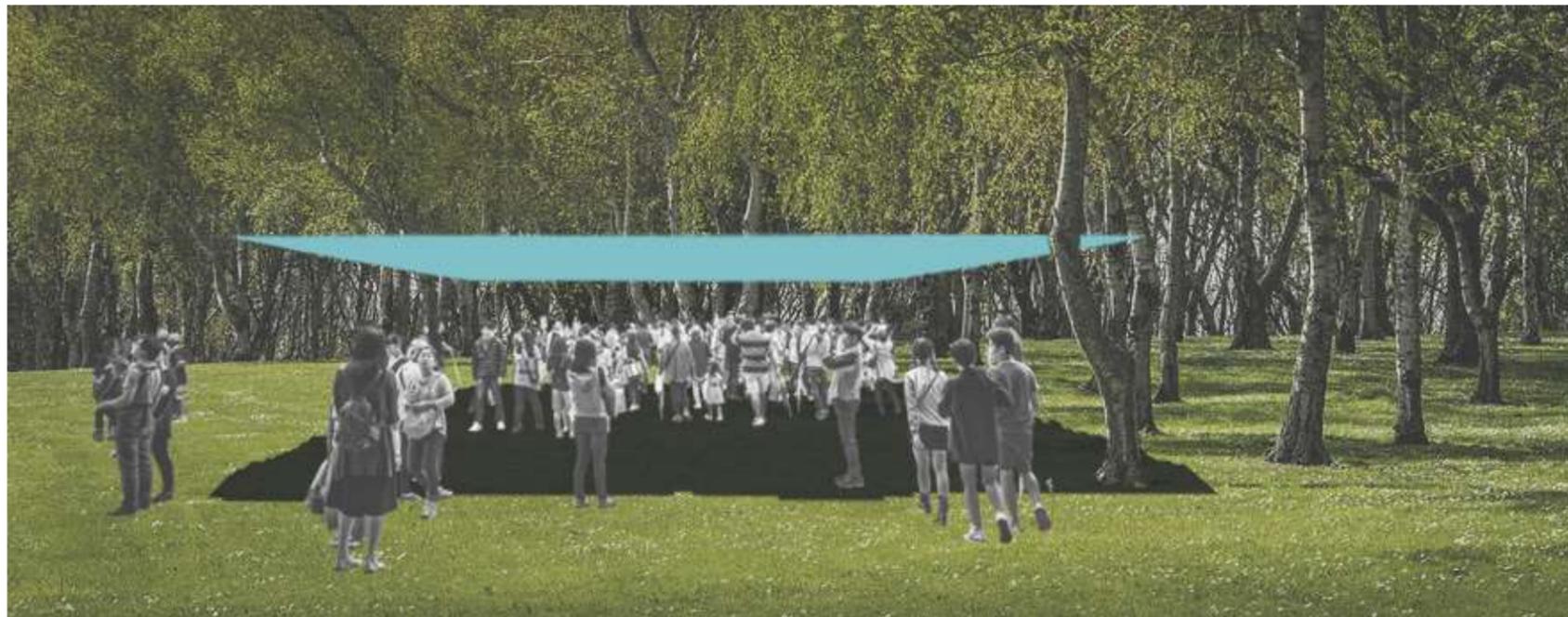


Tactile possibilities

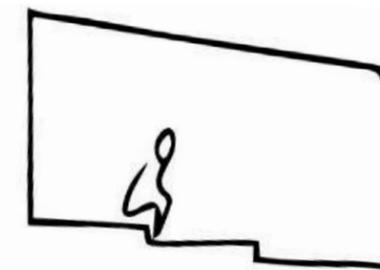
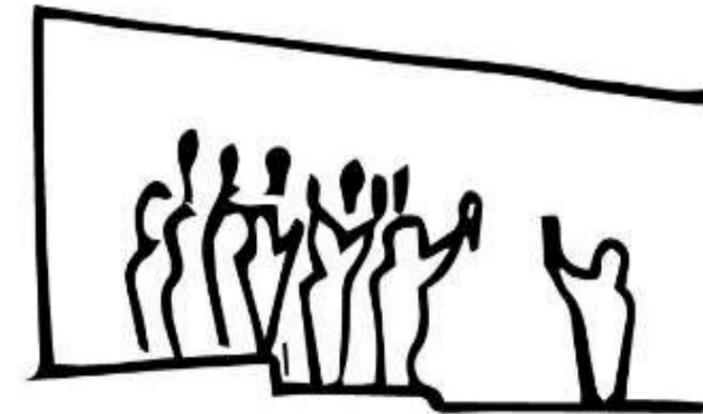
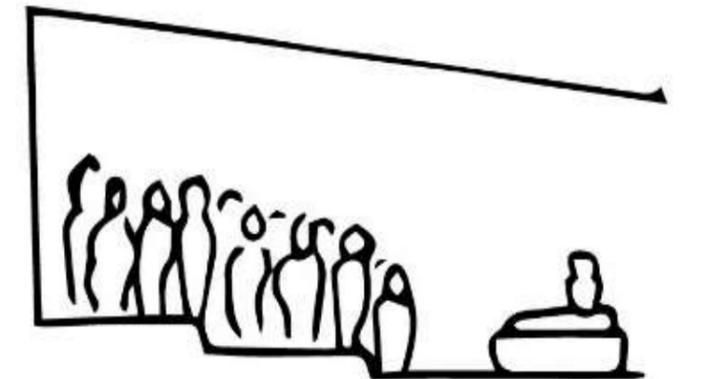
Material possibilities
 DIY possibilities
 Personalization possibilities
 Precious Plastic: open-source plastic recycling/molding machines



CEREMONIAL AND CONTEMPLATIVE STRUCTURES



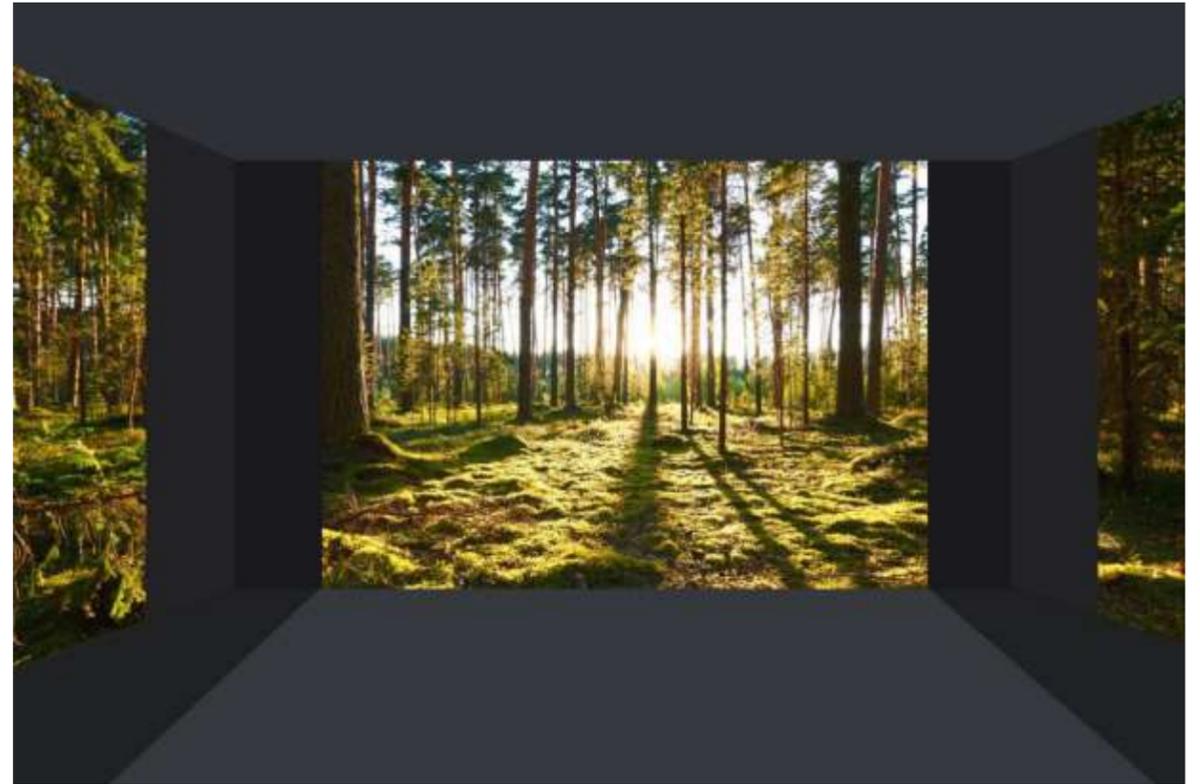
The structure should possibly be able to expand when necessary



Larger sites should have a space for ceremony close, but separate from the memorial grounds as to avoid large events disturbing the silence of people visiting the memorial. For the same reason, as well as solitude, individual resting spots should be present around the area where possible.



Individual small resting spot



Spaces help focus on details in nature
example: artworks by James Turrell

IDEA STORYBOARD



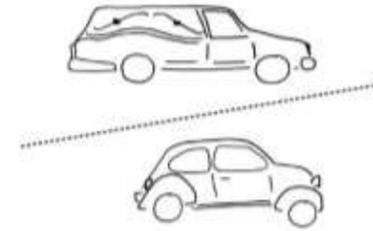
DEATH



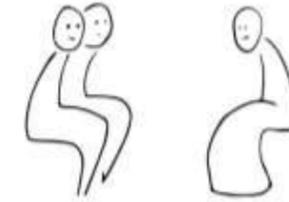
SEARCH AND DECIDE



CALL



PICK UP OR DELIVER BODY



DISCUSS WISHES AND OPTIONS

DISCUSS WITH FAMILY

CALL TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS

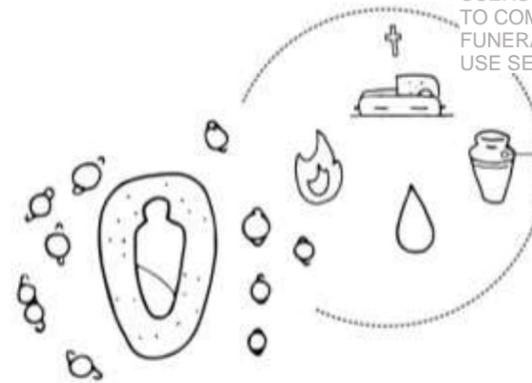
NOTIFY RELATIVES WITH PLAN



X
DAYS



SUGGESTED DONATION QUOTE + ANON DONATION



FUNERAL - POD LAYING CEREMONY

USERS CAN CHOOSE ALTERNATIVES TO COMPOSTING LIKE CHURCH FUNERAL OR CREMATION AND STILL USE SERVICE



DISCUSS REMAINS DISTRIBUTION WITH FAMILY

CALL RELATIVES TO ASK ABOUT WISHES

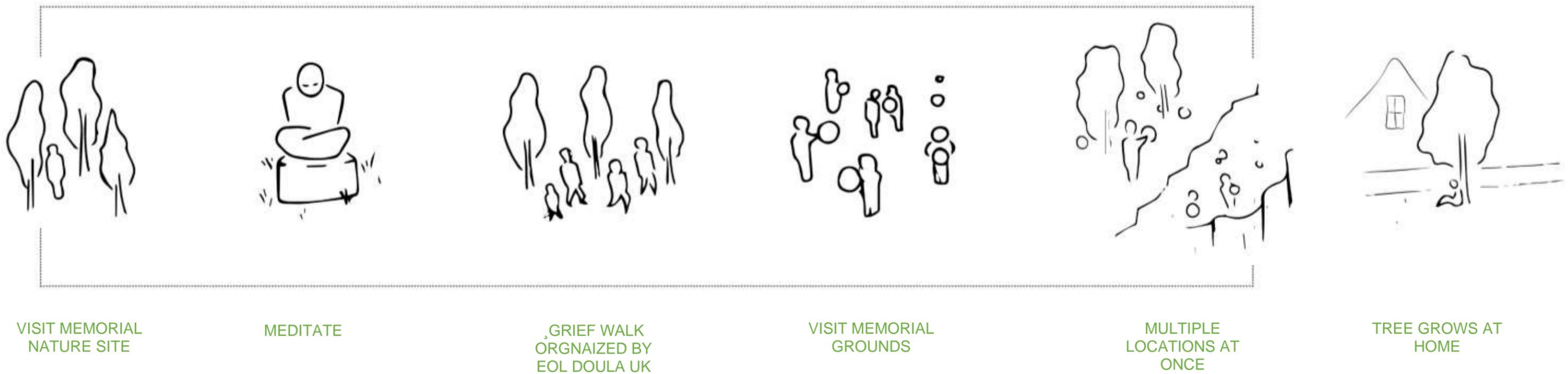
NOTIFY SERVICE OF DECISIONS

30
DAYS

MAKE OR ORDER MARKERS, VESSELS, PLANTERS ETC

MARKER IS INSTALLED

URN CAN BE MADE BY HAND FOR PERSONALISATION AND AFFORDABILITY



ECONOMICS

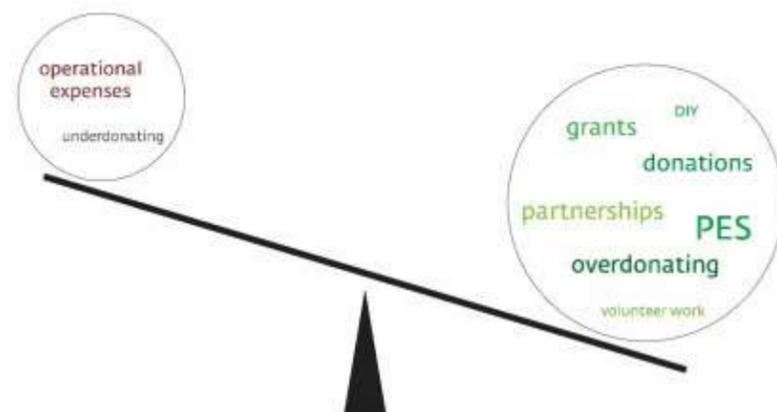
How might it work

The idea was created for The Woodland Trust to implement with their existing network of charities (State of Nature Partnership) thus covering and protecting a range of locations around the UK.

The business aspect of the design is still quite unclear. However, I will attempt to present a possible direction using the information I've gathered combined with informed assumption.

The model needs to be financially stable while providing equal service to underprivileged groups. Emphasis should be on the client's needs and wellbeing. A "bill" containing a suggested donation amount according to chosen options is presented, but the user may donate as much as they can anonymously. There could be therapeutic options to lower the cost, such as making memorial objects yourself out of materials sourced for free.

Since the service would be run by non-profits, prices could be lower than commercial options. PES schemes might be granted on the basis that the service prevents air and ground pollution, restores natural areas, and possibly increases tourism and business. A combination of PES schemes, donations, volunteering, grants, and existing revenue mechanisms can be combined to allow for equal opportunity to all users. My hope is that people would truthfully pay as they can, and that the amounts would balance out as popularity grows.



LAST WORDS

In closing

In this project, I thought about a more holistic approach to death and dying. The outcome started with the idea of how a new system might benefit nature but grew into an exploration of symbiotic relationships between humans and nature.

Through my research, lived experience, conversations with colleagues and friends, and various sources like art, pop-culture and media, I attempted to get a colourful picture of the situation. Although the design remains unfinished, I believe I've explored many possibilities and the potential a new death praxis could bring.

I know this is by no means the end design, rather an early stage of one. Each of the parts of the design outcome (and many more) could be a separate design to develop. My project so far introduces them as directions for further development.

In the future, I wish to advance the project with collaborators in hopes of eventual implementation.

Sincerely, Matija Barović

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<http://www.promessa.se/>

<http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk/>

<https://eol-doula.uk/what-is-an-end-of-life-doula/>

<https://deathcafe.com/>

<http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/>

<https://www.dyingmatters.org/>