

Living Connections: Continuing Bonds Between the Living and the Deceased in Rural Northeastern Slovenia

SIMONA KUNTARIČ ZUPANC

PhD candidate at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology,
Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
simona.kuntariczupanc@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract: The article explores the role of plants in mediating ongoing bonds between the living and the deceased. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural region of northeastern Slovenia, this study focuses on three personal narratives where individuals maintain connections with deceased loved ones through plants. These natural objects – daffodils, a blooming cactus and magnolia trees – serve as material manifestations of the deceased, offering comfort, continuity and a sense of presence. Using the continuing bonds grief model (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996) as a theoretical foundation, the article examines how these bonds transcend traditional bereavement practices, creating everyday spaces for relational continuity. The article argues that plants act as living bridges between the living and the dead, transforming the understanding of grief into a relational process that fosters enduring connections within broader cultural and natural frameworks.

Keywords: flowers, plants, trees, continuing bonds, bereavement practices, the dead, anthropology of death, rural Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

Flowers have long been central to how we mark and make sense of death. They not only reflect the natural cycle of life but also serve as powerful metaphors for transitions, renewal, and memory, from their role as final gifts to the deceased to their symbolic meanings within funeral rites, where color and type hold deep significance. Yet, beyond their role in rituals, flowers take on deeply personal meanings for the bereaved. In my fieldwork, flowers emerge not just as symbols but as living connections between the living and the dead. This article explores how blooming plants, present in the everyday lives of individuals, may hold the presence of the deceased and offer comfort, resilience and a sense of enduring relationality between the living and the dead.

The dominant Western ideology sees the dead as absent from people's daily lives with contemporary lifestyles often portraying the individuals as self-sufficient and independent of others, both the living and the dead (Walter 2018). Although the dead are considered absent from public discourse, several researchers challenged this view, demonstrating that they may remain present and have significant influence on people's daily lives (e.g. Walter 2020; Walter 2016; Hallam & Hockey 2001). The dead can impact daily life and social norms, as reflected in their continued agency (Walter 2018), and may act as carriers of social memory. This is particularly evident in politically or socially sensitive deaths, such as violent ones, where the dead highlight injustices and reshape collective memory (Mencej 2021). Richardson (2003) shows how stories of haunted dead reveal unresolved social conflicts and help shape communities. In some contexts, the dead are also seen as active figures, 'moral agents' who can actively influence the lives of the living, especially when certain moral norms are violated (Mencej 2024). Hallam and Hockey (2001) examine how material culture – from everyday objects to funerary monuments – helps maintain connections between the living and the dead in Western societies.

The article is based on ethnographic field research conducted from January to November 2024 in the rural northeastern region of Slovenia, which borders Austria, Hungary and Croatia. This area is characterized by a picturesque landscape of flat plains, rolling hills and scattered villages. The region is known for its agricultural traditions, but many residents nowadays commute to work in nearby towns or across the border in Austria. The population is predominantly elderly, as younger people tend to move to urban areas in search of better job opportunities. This part of Slovenia is also characterized by a mixture of Roman Catholic and Protestant communities, and some smaller neo-Protestant communities such as the Calvinists and the Pentecostal Church.

In my research I used a classical ethnographic approach, combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews to explore how individuals experience, interpret and engage with the presence of the dead in their everyday lives. During my fieldwork, I visited 24 small villages in the area and

conducted interviews with 154 interlocutors of different ages and genders. However, due to the demographic composition of the region, I spoke mainly with older interlocutors, with a predominance of female participants. During the fieldwork I audio-taped numerous personal narratives and was particularly drawn to stories of enduring bonds with the deceased expressed through natural objects such as plants. These connections go beyond memory, as the presence of and interaction with the dead continue to be felt and experienced through the growth and blooming of plants, which are closely interwoven with daily life. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the *continuing bonds* grief model (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996), the research explores the bonds between the living and the dead that go beyond traditional bereavement practices and create an everyday space for maintaining contact with the (known) deceased.

CONTINUING BONDS

In contemporary Western ontology, the dominant idea is that the dead are primarily passive and that their presence in the lives of the living is limited to memory. Freud's theory posited that healthy grief required the bereaved to detach from the deceased within a limited time frame, as the maintenance of bonds with them was considered pathological (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996: 33–35). At the end of the last century, however, Klass, Silverman, and Nickman introduced an alternative perspective in the book *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (1996), challenging the then-prevailing notion that bereaved must “break the bonds of past relationships” in order to move forward and establish new connections. In this volume, authors emphasized that a significant aspect of navigating loss lies in maintaining a connection between the bereaved and the deceased (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996: 3). They proposed a shift in the understanding of grief, suggesting that continuing bonds with the deceased should be recognized as one possible way of adapting to life after loss (Silverman & Nickman 1996: 351). Unlike Freud's model, the continuing bonds framework acknowledges relationships that go beyond mere remembrance, involving continued interactions with the deceased through symbolic, sensory and even material connections.

The continuing bonds grief model represents a natural and potentially adaptive part of the grieving process, allowing people to maintain meaningful connections that provide comfort, preserve memories and support psychological resilience in the midst of loss. However, not all bereaved individuals experience a sense of presence or a continuation of bonds with the deceased. Likewise, not all continuing interactions with the dead lead to better adjustment (see Klass 2006: 844); as Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996: 72) noted, “we need to be open to both the positive and negative consequences of this activity”. Moreover, grief cannot be understood as having a clear endpoint, nor can

it be framed in terms of recovery or resolution, as these terms imply a final stage. The process of adaptation does not sever or disregard past relationships; instead, it integrates them into a broader framework of meaningful exchanges (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996: 19).

Forms of Continuing Bonds

The continuing bonds model represents a significant shift in bereavement studies, challenging earlier psychological theories that framed grief as a process of detachment from the deceased. Within this framework, bonding was understood as a dynamic social act sustained through various interactions, forms of communication and the active preservation of the deceased's legacy (Walter 1996: 69–82; Day 2012; Koski 2016).

These bonds manifest in various forms, including the perception of the deceased's presence, the internalization of their characteristics, or the belief that the deceased actively influences the bereaved's thoughts or events in their life. Additionally, these connections may appear as dream visitations (e.g., see Hesz 2012; Kiliánová 2010: 13–14), precognitive visions (see Rees 1972), or telepathic experiences with the deceased. Symbolic messages, significant spontaneous thoughts and synchronicities – such as coincidental events or the appearance of objects associated with the deceased – are also frequently reported (see Parker 2005: 257–258). In addition, some report unusual activity in electrical appliances or meaningfully timed appearances of animals, rainbows and other symbolic natural phenomena as signs of ongoing bonds (Kwilecki 2011: 220).

The internalization of the deceased is not necessarily tied to religious beliefs or an expectation of an afterlife but rather reflects an individual's psychological adaptation to loss. Through internalized relationships, the bereaved integrate the memory, values and influence of the deceased into their own identities and everyday lives (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996). Parker (2005: 262) notes that while belief in an afterlife may help mitigate the disruption caused by death, even those who do not hold such beliefs can experience a profound sense of continuity through internalized memories and emotions. The bereaved may continue conversations with the deceased in their thoughts, seek guidance from them or make life decisions based on their perceived influence. As Kwilecki (2011) notes, these experiences are often framed as comforting encounters in which the deceased convey messages of love, reassurance and ongoing presence in the mourner's life. Such interactions offer a way for individuals to maintain a meaningful relationship with the dead, even as they move forward in their own lives.

Sensory experiences related to the deceased are another common form of continuing bonds, encompassing visual phenomena (e.g. apparitions), auditory perceptions (e.g. hearing the deceased's voice), olfactory sensations (e.g. specific scents linked to the deceased) and the mental reception of messages

from the dead (see Klass & Steffen 2018, Parker 2005: 257–258; Bennett 1999: 109; Davies 1997: 156). Within the context of bereavement and grief, Parker (2005: 257) defines “extraordinary” experiences as experiences occurring at the time of or after the death of someone known to the experiencer and perceived as contact or communication with the deceased. These experiences are far from abstract, distant or immaterial. Instead, the presence of loved ones is felt in tangible, embodied ways. Extraordinary experiences can be a form of continuing bonds, as they allow contact with the deceased to be expressed through unusual or symbolic events that the individual understands as a sign from or communication with the dead. Extraordinary experiences, being rare and deeply meaningful events perceived as being outside the boundaries of everyday life, provide a direct and embodied way for the bereaved to maintain symbolic connections with the deceased.

The material world also plays an important role in maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased. Hallam and Hockey (2001) explore how material objects maintain these relationships, arguing that personal belongings – including garments, letters and photographs – preserve the presence of the dead and act as a safeguard against forgetting (Hallam & Hockey 2001). Gifting objects to the dead – for example placing flowers on graves, lighting candles or leaving personal items – demonstrates how material culture facilitates ongoing relationships (Jonsson & Walter 2017: 407). These acts are not simply gestures of remembrance but performative ways of maintaining a bond, reflecting both cultural traditions and personal expressions of grief. Physical spaces of memorialization, such as cemeteries, tombstones, home altars or dedicated rooms, provide a setting for ritual interaction and reinforcing the sense that the deceased remain part of everyday life (see Maddrell 2013; Jonsson & Walter 2017). The presence is further maintained through rituals, visits to significant places and material objects – graves, personal mementos and symbolic offerings like flowers or plants – which serve as tangible connections between the living and the dead (see e.g. Clayden & Dixon 2007). Maddrell (2016), who has conducted research on how continuing bonds are maintained in more overt “deathscapes”, identified three overlapping spatial arenas in which the deceased may be placed – physical or material (comprising obvious deathscapes such as cemeteries and shrines), embodied-psychological (which are more subjective and personal) and nonmaterial spaces (such as support groups, social media, or heaven).

Continuing bonds with the deceased are therefore not merely mental or emotional constructs, but rather a multidimensional process that encompasses the reorganization of relationships after death, the role of the deceased within family and community systems and their influence on the living (Klass & Steffen 2018: 4). As Klass and Steffen argue, the bonds formed during life persist in the posthumous relationship, but they can also change, offering the bereaved an opportunity to develop a connection that may not have been possible while

the person was alive. While personal experiences of the dead are unique, they are also shaped by broader cultural narratives and norms. Grief is an intersubjective process that is not only an individual experience but also takes place in a relational and communal context. The model shows that these relationships are embedded in social and cultural systems and are not isolated psychological phenomena (Klass & Steffen 2018), and that continued bonds therefore reflect shared meanings and collective practices rather than purely individual bonds.

While Klass and Steffen cite many studies and examples of forms of continuing bonds, they do not specifically address the bond with the deceased through plants. The phenomenon, which I encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork, adds another dimension to the concept of continuing bonds. Based on my field research in the rural northeastern region of Slovenia, I will argue that plants act as material and sensorial bridges between the living and the dead, enabling the bereaved to maintain connections with the deceased beyond traditional bereavement practices. I will suggest that plants and flowers represent one form of continuing bonds, acting as living elements that provide relational continuity and comfort to the bereaved.

CONTINUING BONDS AND PLANTS

In the following, I will explore a specific form of continuing bonds observed in my fieldwork: plants and their natural cycles serve as material connections between the living and the dead, offering comfort, continuity and a sense of the dead's presence. My ethnographic research suggests that the dead manifest themselves through continued interaction with natural objects, such as plants, perceived by my interlocutors as both symbolic and living manifestations of the ongoing bonds with the deceased. They not only allowed the bereaved to remember their dead loved ones but also to sense their continued presence in daily life.

My aim is not to examine institutionalized bereavement practices. Instead, I take an ethnographic approach, drawing on narratives collected from small villages and focusing on various ways in which the living experience and interact with the dead. I will first present three personal narratives that illustrate different ways in which plants maintain bonds between the living and the dead. Then, I will place these examples within the broader framework of local cultural practices and beliefs. Finally, I will discuss how these everyday interactions with the natural world reflect a continuous presence of the dead in people's lives and contribute to the broader discussion of continuing bonds.

Daffodils in Bloom



Figure 1. Blooming daffodils.

Photographed on March 3, 2024, by Simona K. Zupanc.

The first narrative was told by Geza¹, born in the 1940s. He is a retired school-teacher. Although he grew up in a Catholic environment, he now identifies as an atheist.

At the beginning of March, winter is slowly giving way to spring in a region known for its lush sunshine. The first flowers in the meadows and gardens signal the awakening of nature. It was on one of those crisp, bright days, with a hint of warmth in the air, that I rode my bike to Geza's house. Geza welcomed me warmly and began to show me around the house, which he, like many others in the area, had built himself in the 1980s. During the walk, our conversation naturally turned to his early childhood and his relationship with his parents. He explained that he had a close bond with his mother, but his relationship with his father was much more distant, mainly due to his father's seasonal work in Austria and the resulting absences. This long absence, coupled with his father's alcohol problems, led to a strained relationship within the family. His parents later separated, and his father remarried, further disrupting their

bonds. However, his father's absence only strengthened Geza's connection with his mother.

You know, it was like this; I liked my mother much more, while my father was mostly at work. [...] I had an excellent relationship with my mother, but with my father so-so – in particular, I had to take care of him so to keep him out of trouble. He didn't even earn a pension because he was a seasonal worker. In the summer he worked, and in the winter, he drank at home. (February 28, 2024)

Geza recalls that his family, like many others in the region, lived in poverty at the time. While his father wanted him to follow in his footsteps as a bricklayer, his mother strongly encouraged him to get an education, as a means to secure him a better future. Her words “go and study” stayed with him and influenced his decisions throughout his life. Geza's mother worked on the family farm and spent most of her time at home, strengthening her attachment to the home-stead. Shortly after her death the family house was destroyed by fire, causing Geza to lose all the objects that reminded him of her.

I have no memories left. That's what hurt me the most. Nothing, nothing at all. Everything is gone, yes. Everything. All the memories. (February 28, 2024)

When she died, Geza was 18 and still in high school. Motivated by her encouragement, he chose to continue his studies and eventually earned a college degree. After graduation, he returned to his hometown to work and build a new house on the site where he had once lived with his mother. He reflects on how the area where the house now stands was once covered in mud and his mother often wished the house had been built on higher ground. As he looked back on his achievements, he recalled his aunt telling him that his mother would have been proud of what he had accomplished. Despite losing his memories in the fire, one in particular remains vivid – Geza continues:

There was a swamp and at school we learned about daffodils. I found one, dug it up and brought it home to my mother. She said, “Plant it here in the garden.” Now it has 70 flowers, that's how much it has multiplied. [...] This is the only living memory I have of my mother. [...] I loved to pick flowers and bring them to her. And whenever I go to the cemetery, I think of these things. (February 28, 2024)

For Geza, daffodils are more than just flowers – they serve as a material anchor that allows him to feel his mother's presence, strengthen their bond and maintain a sense of continuity, enabling him to actively engage with her

memory. This interaction with the daffodils aligns with the continuing bonds model, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining a connection with the deceased through objects, rituals, or memories. In this case, the plant serves as a tangible manifestation of Geza's enduring emotional bond with his mother. Rather than seeing her death as the end of their relationship, he uses the daffodils to perpetuate her presence in his life.

Blooming Christmas Cactus

The second narrative was told by Erika, born in the 1950s. She is a retired kindergarten teacher who identifies as Catholic and practices her faith, especially during important Christian holidays. I met Erika for the first time in the local cultural center at the opening of an exhibition on agricultural work in paintings. After that, I visited her several times for coffee, where she told me stories about her family and life in the village. In these conversations, she often reminisced about her childhood, and her mother in particular:

Back then, it was just normal – I would come home from school, and I had to lift every pot lid, even if I had already eaten lunch, just to try something. And now, even though she's [her mother] been gone for six years, I think of her every year. She used to make strudels, cabbage ones, and ones with yellow turnip. And now I've been making them ever since she's gone. Somehow, I feel like it's a way of remembering her. Those little habits of hers that we loved but didn't practice before.
(March 7, 2024)

One of our conversations took place just a few weeks before Easter, during Lent – a time traditionally dedicated to reflection, fasting and spiritual preparation, which that year began on Ash Wednesday, February 14. During our conversations, she frequently spoke about her close relationship with her father, who passed away when she was 18 years old. She recalled how he used to weave baskets and mentioned that she still keeps one he made for potatoes. She cherishes it as a precious reminder and a way to feel connected to him by preserving and continuing the habits he once had. This loss profoundly affected her and led to an even stronger bond with her mother, who passed away six years ago. After her mother's death, she began to sense her presence in a cactus that her mother had given her. She shared how her mother's soul manifests in the cactus's unexpected blooming, offering her comfort and reassurance that her mother was still there, watching over her.

I often think about my mother... and she's within me, isn't she? How would my mother do this, how would she help me, how should I decide? And it's very interesting, that cactus I have there. Yes, it bloomed a lot for my mother, and then she gave me a small one. It

didn't bloom for five years, but after my mother died, it bloomed for the first time at Christmas. And that meant a lot to me. I think there's a kind of energy that stays behind; maybe the soul travels away, not exactly in a religious sense, and that meant so much to me. It was as if she had given me a sign that she was still somehow present, and it bloomed again at Christmas. And recently, I've seen it bloom again, just in time for Easter, because it always bloomed for her at Easter. And that's... and then you start thinking, there really is something to it. [...] If I were to explain that to someone, they might say I'm a bit crazy [...] (March 7, 2024)

Although Erika considers the experience extraordinary, she is assured that her mother is still present and communicates with her by causing the cactus to flourish. She was especially surprised when the cactus bloomed for the first time since her mother's passing.

[...] I kept moving it around, but it just would not bloom. And really, the year after she died, it bloomed for the first time. And that somehow moved me. Especially now that she's gone [...] Now it blooms for the first time at Easter. It used to only bloom at Christmas. And I, for one, have no explanation for that. But like you asked, I feel like she is watching over me and giving me signs that we're still connected somehow. (March 7, 2024)

Erika is a Christian, and the Christian faith does not support the belief in communication with the dead. However, in this case, she is unconcerned with the church's stance. These beliefs are not religious, nor do they reflect abstract ideas about heaven, hell or the nature of spirit, soul or matter, as Abby Day argues (2012). She demonstrates that experiences of continuing bonds with the deceased are primarily *relational* rather than rooted in traditional religious or spiritual frameworks. Instead of being framed as encounters with spirits or supernatural phenomena, they emerge through ongoing social connections with significant deceased individuals. Day's research highlights how people engage with the presence of the dead in ways that reflect personal relationships, memories and emotions, rather than conforming to religious dogma or institutionalized beliefs, which reflects a broader shift in which religion has become decentralized, allowing individuals to construct their own beliefs without answering to institutionalized religion or science unless they choose to do so. As Kwilecki (2009: 106) demonstrates in the American context, the tension between religion and science that once shaped spiritualist movements has eased over time, giving rise to a more individualized approach to faith. The increasing diversification of religious and spiritual beliefs has facilitated the persistence of emotional bonds with the dead outside the confines of traditional

religious frameworks. The view aligns with Erika's experience of feeling her mother's presence through the blooming cactus, demonstrating a personal and relational connection that transcends conventional religious doctrines.

The cactus bloomed again at Easter, further reinforcing Erika's belief that her mother's *energy* was truly still present. It bloomed on an important holiday for Erika, which she usually celebrates with her family. The holiday holds dual significance: on the one hand, according to Christian dogma, it represents the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, symbolizes hope, victory over death and life after death; on the other hand, it marks the beginning of spring, the awakening of nature and the symbolism of rebirth. Easter is therefore connected to both religious traditions and seasonal cycles, where spiritual and natural renewal intertwine. Erika's interpretation of the blooming cactus as a sign of her mother's presence indeed aligns with a broader vernacular discourse in the Western world that ascribes agency to the dead. As Walter (2016) notes, the deceased are often imagined not as passive souls trapped in heaven, but as active agents – akin to angels – who move between worlds to guide and care for the living. Similarly, Erika perceives the blossoming of the cactus, which she believes was triggered by her mother, as a conscious act of her mother's presence and care, particularly on important Christian holidays. For Erika, the moment holds deep significance, as it reinforces her ongoing bond with her mother and highlights her mother's agency in shaping meaningful moments in her life.

Walter's insights offer a theoretical framework for understanding such phenomena, emphasizing that the agency of the dead is not only culturally recognized but also personally experienced. In Erika's case, the blooming cactus serves both as a tangible manifestation of her mother's presence and care and a spiritual connection that transcends conventional religious dogma. As scholars of continuing bonds have demonstrated, the bereaved often find ways to maintain the relationship with the deceased through everyday actions or objects with symbolic meaning. Continuing bonds in the form of actions can be integrated into everyday life, such as tending flowers – practices that are performed without fixed places, times or special occasions (Lau & Fong & Chan 2018: 281–282). The constant care becomes a subtle, continuous expression of connectedness that blends seamlessly into the rhythm of daily life.

Through Erika's relationship with the cactus and seasonal blooms, we see how memory, spirituality and material objects can be woven together to create a reassuring sense of continuity. Erika associates the blooming of the cactus with pleasant feelings and senses the presence of her mother. This is especially important to her on traditional Christian holidays, which she usually celebrates with her family members. Similarly, Kwilecki (2009: 115) notes that the dead, according to after-death-communication testimonies, often manifest during holidays and special occasions, when their absence might be particularly stressful for the living. In Erika's case, the timing of the cactus'

blossoming on these occasions suggests that her mother is reintegrated into the family, once again becoming part of the gathered household. Rather than being a mere coincidence, the flowering of the cactus becomes a meaningful event that underscores Erika's enduring connection with her mother, particularly on days meant for family togetherness.

Magnolia Tree



Figure 2. Magnolia tree in bloom.

Photographed on March 26, 2024, by Simona K. Zupanc.

The third personal narrative was told by Tomaž, born in the 1970s. He is a farmer with a college degree and grew up in a Catholic setting but no longer feels tied to dominant religious practices. I got to know Tomaž right at the beginning of my field research. In the course of my research, I visited his family several times and talked to them about village life, their work and family history. He lives with his family on a small plot of land that he and his late wife bought as an abandoned property and slowly renovated themselves. He tries to grow as much of their own food as possible, but on the other hand, he is also careful not

to harm nature by farming. He follows the principles of permaculture, a system of planning that allows people to meet their needs without harming the environment but rather benefiting it and thus allowing it to live “forever”. For Tomaž, however, permaculture is not just a farming method but a way of life – a philosophy of living in harmony with nature and oneself.

After the death of his first wife, Tomaž remarried, and together with his second wife, they continue their work on the property. Tomaž and his wife often involved me in larger tasks on the property, such as mowing and hay harvesting. They also generously lent me several interesting books by local authors and gave me insightful recommendations, reflecting their shared passion for literature. Both also have a keen interest in traditional folk medicine and eagerly share their extensive knowledge on the subject during our meetings.

He shared that after his former wife was diagnosed with a debilitating condition, she changed dramatically. Eventually, she separated from him and moved in with her parents, where she passed away a few months later. In the last months of her life, they had no contact due to their divorce, which affected him greatly. Her family blamed him for her illness, and due to the family disputes, he decided not to attend her funeral. Tomaž explained that the grave her parents had placed in the cemetery in their hometown held no personal meaning for him. However, he understood her decision, given her illness. Despite the estrangement, Tomaž described how they continued their relationship after her death, as if the conflict and divorce had never happened.

She [his late wife] is the person with whom I still have the closest connection. As for the influence on my decisions... well, she's often on my mind. I don't necessarily consult her when I'm thinking about something, but I think of her often, especially in good or challenging times. It's a kind of gratitude, I think. We bought and built this house together, so it's like she's still a part of it. [...] Eight. Eight years [since she died]. Her spirit, or what we shared, is still present. How much that influences my current decisions, I can't say. I don't rely on it and I don't try to. (March 13, 2024)

This is similar to Klass and Steffen's description of how the entire history of the bond between people when they were living carries over into the bond after their death, although the living have opportunities to reshape the bond that they did not have when the person was alive (2018: 4). In Tomaž's case, his wife's death offered him the opportunity to overcome the unresolved conflicts that had characterized their last years together. Tomaž, like the other two interlocutors, speaks of his wife's presence in a plant. The presence is particularly strong during the time of its blooming.

After she died, my son and I planted some magnolia trees that always remind me of her. They remind me of her every day when I walk around here. It's like we planted them instead of having a tombstone or something like that. They are the place where I think of her most often. The magnolia blooms in early April, on her birthday, but I see that it may bloom earlier this year. So, in that way... well... (hesitantly). The years after her death were very hard, and during that time my relationship with her felt even more intense. But life went on. I have a new wife and another daughter, so her presence is not as intense now. (March 13, 2024)

The magnolia tree that Tomaž planted in his herb garden serves as an alternative to a traditional tombstone. The tree, which surrounds him every day as he moves around the garden, preserves the presence of his wife, his memory and interactions with her. Although Tomaž no longer practices Catholic religion, the natural cycle of life now forms the foundation of his worldview.

The concept that comes closest to me is the eternal cycle in nature, where everything transforms from one living form to another and then into forms that we call dead, but from another perspective are probably alive. This eternal cycle is a comfort to me, especially because I am so involved in agriculture. It comforts me to see that even if you uproot a plant, it turns into compost and then something new grows. Everything is connected. I try to make my environment as alive as possible because I believe it supports us better and we can integrate into the cycle more easily than in a desolate or dead environment. Religion, well, that's kind of a worldview [...] (March 13, 2024)

In speaking about the eternal cycle in nature, Tomaž expresses the concept of life after death through the transformation of life forms, death being part of a continuous, interconnected cycle of life. This view is similar to Day's (2012) assertion that people who believe in an afterlife essentially maintain a belief in the continuation of important relationships. For Tomaž, the cycle of life and death through nature represents a comforting relational continuity with the deceased, reflecting a deep connection with both life and the world around him. Through Tomaž's relationship with the magnolias and his embrace of the natural cycle, we see how bereavement and memory are transformed in a way that intertwines human life with the ecological world, creating a cyclical, living bond that endures beyond death.

Indeed, Tomaž expressed his wish for a similar way of life after death, i.e. a continuation in another natural life form. This might refer to symbolic immortality, a secular model for understanding life after death introduced by

Robert J. Lifton in the 1970s. He developed this concept to address the psychobiological need of humans to symbolize death and affirm the continuity of life. Lifton calls this the “sense of symbolic immortality” and argues that life is fundamentally threatened if death cannot be transcended (Lifton 1983 [1979]: 19–23). This transcendence is achieved through contributions to the world and a sense of connectedness to enduring phenomena and values that give life meaning and continuity. One of five manifestations of symbolic immortality, proposed by Lifton, is “natural immortality”, which emphasizes a deep connection to the natural world and views death as a return to earth (Lifton 1983 [1979]: 22–23). Tomaž’s desire to continue life in a natural form reflects this perspective, as he sees death not as an end, but as a transformation – a reintegration into the cycles of nature.

In Western cultures, the practice of planting a tree instead of erecting a tombstone, known as ‘eco-tombstones’, has recently gained popularity as an environmentally friendly alternative to traditional stone memorials. Replacing marble memorials with natural imagery, such as trees or other plants, not only offers alternatives to conventional burials but also incorporates the comforting and calming effects of nature. These practices are increasingly tied to ecological concerns, environmental care and commitment to the planet’s well-being. Although modern, these practices can be historically traced back to the 19th century, when garden cemeteries in France and America were established to create “a meaningful connection between dying on the one hand and the cosmic rhythms of nature on the other” (Mosse 1990: 114). Researchers such as Maria Piekarska (2020) are exploring how ‘environmental memorials’ create a living memorial to honor the dead and embody the natural progression of the life cycle in a way that changes over time. Just as the dynamics of remembering the deceased change over time, natural spaces never remain static (Piekarska 2020: 114). This approach not only respects ecological continuity but also personalizes remembrance by connecting the deceased to the growth and renewal of the earth. This dynamic quality of nature as ‘living matter’ (Bennett 2009, cited in Piekarska 2020) not only distinguishes environmental memorials from static stone tombstones, but also opens up new possibilities for the redesign of commemorative practices (Piekarska 2020: 103). Historically, one could also refer to the evolving memorials in Germany’s Heldenhaine (heroic forests), where planted trees symbolized individual soldiers and incorporated their memory into the natural cycle of death and renewal (Mosse 1990: 87–89).

CONCLUSION

This article argues that people may experience the presence of the deceased through plants. I have presented three personal narratives of those who maintained lasting bonds with their significant others through plants. The deceased thus remain interwoven with the lives of the living, as people use plants, their blooming and growth, as a way to connect with them. Focusing on these personal narratives, the article departs from conventional interpretations of bereavement, which are often framed and influenced by dominant religious dogma. Instead, it adopts a phenomenological approach to better understand the everyday lives of rural communities in northeastern Slovenia.

In this article, I demonstrated that plants serve to maintain bonds between the living and the dead, manifesting different meanings and connections depending on individual perspectives. While continuing bonds with the deceased can manifest in diverse ways for any given individual, these are not limited to experiences involving plants or nature; indeed, multiple forms of continuing bonds may coexist within a single person. For Erika, the blooming cactus is the manifestation of her mother's active agency, an (intentional) sign from her; for Geza, daffodils represent his mother's attachment to flowers, which he inherited, serving as a reminder of her; for Tomaž, the magnolia tree he planted after his wife's death serves as a new manifestation of her life and a "living" tombstone.

These experiences, while not necessarily tied to religion or spiritual beliefs, emphasize relationality (Day 2012), highlighting the continuation of relationships rather than individual existence. At least in the case of Erika, beliefs in the existence and immortality of the soul are evident, yet these beliefs are not rooted in formal religious doctrine. Instead, they emerge from her personal experiences and the enduring sense of relationship she maintains with the deceased. Koski (2016) demonstrates that people interpret extraordinary experiences through various discourses, which are not only explanatory frameworks but also tools for establishing identities and relationships with the world. As in my fieldwork data, one can recognize different patterns of articulation of such experiences by different interlocutors. For example, Erika speaks of "energy" manifesting itself in the form of blooming, opening up a space for the interpretation of something beyond the material, a concept Heelas (1996) discusses, highlighting energy as central to New Age beliefs, where it is seen as a force linking the spiritual and material realms. Geza's daffodils are more than a memory of his late mother – they are a material symbol of their bond, offering continuity and connection. According to Walter (2019), Western societies tend to reduce the relationship between the living and the dead to a one-sided act of memory, leaving little room for reciprocal exchange or the sense that the deceased might still have an active presence in the lives of the living. This is why objects become crucial carriers of this relationship – not merely keepsakes, but

tangible embodiments of stories and connections. In Geza's case, the daffodils take on the role of such an object – but unlike objects that risk losing meaning, as Walter describes, the daffodils are living organisms that continuously renew and multiply. In this way, they do not merely preserve memory but allow for a recurring experience of connection with Geza's mother. Tomaž, on the other hand, associates his deceased wife with nature, which can be linked to the idea of cyclicity and connection to the natural world. This connection resonates with contemporary ecological tendencies that emphasize living in harmony with natural cycles. In this sense, the connection reflects broader environmental sensibilities, framing human life and death as integral parts of nature's continuous flow.

Our social reality is shaped by different, often contradictory views: depending on the situation, people may use different discourses that can occasionally overlap, contradict or complement each other (Koski 2016: 22).

In a broader sense, this article aims to show how people combine traditional bereavement practices with personal and contemporary ecological practices and adapt them to make meaning of their own experiences and needs. In this way, they create practices in which the natural cycle plays a key role in their interactions and memories of the dead – in particular, the symbolic message of the dead is often transmitted by the blooming of a plant. All three narratives take place at the beginning of spring, a time when nature starts to awaken and plants begin to bloom. It is important to consider the natural cycle in which these conversations occurred, as it is likely that at a different time of year, other narratives could have come to the forefront.

Practices such as planting and caring for plants allow the bereaved to connect the memory of and care for the deceased with nature and its growth cycle through activities that are necessary for the plant's survival and consequently provide a sense of continuity. In this way, they affirm that the bonds they shared do not disappear with death but are transformed into lasting and living connections.

Indeed, Strang (2023) explored natural beings and nature worship reflecting on the long-term trajectories in human relationships with the environment and emphasized that early human societies revered the creatures of nature. This belief supported cooperative and reciprocal efforts to coexist respectfully with the non-human world and enabled sustainable living. This view aligns with the idea that natural elements are not just passive parts of the environment, but active participants in people's cultural and spiritual practices. By incorporating these natural elements into rituals and daily life, people can feel a tangible connection to their deceased, reinforcing the idea that relationships with the deceased remain alive through the natural world. Without it, trees or flowers would lose this meaning and become mere landscape backdrops or decorative potted plants on the windowsill.

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NOTE

1 All names in this article are pseudonymized.

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Simona Kuntarič Zupanc is a PhD candidate at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and a researcher in the project DEAGENCY. Her research focuses on the anthropology of death.

simona.kuntariczupanc@ff.uni-lj.si