

# Title: Mourning as Mutuality

Author: Jason Danely

Senior Lecturer in Anthropology of Japan, Oxford Brookes University  
[jdanely@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:jdanely@brookes.ac.uk)

## Abstract:

More people in Japan are living into old age than ever before, and most will receive care from a spouse or adult child in the years prior to death. I argue that this care, and the ways it affects emotional adjustment in bereavement, are the most important factors shaping patterns of mourning and memorial in contemporary Japan. By turning from the spectacle of collective and public rituals around death and examining individual narratives, I show how care becomes the basis for the experience of what Strait (2008) calls "entangled agency" and Sahlins refers to as "mutuality of being" with the deceased after the care has finished. I argue that providing care for a dying older person entails practices, sensibilities, and affective attunements that bring about transformations of the self that persist after death. The imagined transformations of the deceased in the 'other world' and the intimate and interdependent relationships sustained through memorialization constitute both an internal coping device for re-representing the painful experience of loss and haunting, but also a liberating sense of the agency of the deceased, watchful and waiting.

## 1. Meaning and Being

In the conclusion of their essay on “Mourning and Meaning,” (2002) Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies suggest that when we call loss and mourning ‘meaningful,’ we must take on board more than just the “cognitions in the minds of individuals” and recognize ways “that which appears most irreducibly personal—namely, our implicit working models of self and world—are anchored in our attachment bonds to significant others” (2002, 248). Not only are personal narratives of loss meaningful because they are conveyed in words and images that are themselves legible as part of a social context, but because they strike at the heart of our intrinsic participation in each other’s being. Relatedness, in Marshall Sahlin’s (2013, ix) sense of being “members of one another” and sharing a “mutuality of being,” animates and gives creative potential to the intimacy of everyday care and the despair and dislocation of grief.

In this essay, I want to explore the notion of mutuality in death and bereavement, a context that is typically associated with separation, detachment, and distance. For Japanese carers of older family members, mutuality, nurtured in end of life care through practices of attunement to the other’s body and feelings, persists into practices of long-term memorial and meaningful attachments. While this model will not fit every circumstance, it was very unusual for family carers to find their experience, even when very difficult, to be meaningless after the cared-for (the older person who received care) died. In every case where Japanese carers found giving end-of-life care meaningful and transformative, they also continued to share a mutuality of being with the dead, feeling their watchful presence in ways that helped them bear the lonely endurance of living out their own old age. I will give a few examples of this and contrast it with carers in the UK who did not have a cultural symbolic framework to guide their post-care narrative of mourning.

In some ways, then, this essay departs from much of the conventional cross-cultural anthropological accounts of death and bereavement that have tended to focus primarily on the treatment of the corpse and the public mortuary rituals and memorial practices that take place after death (Huntington and Metcalf 1991; Palgi and Abromovich 1984). This innovative way of approaching death moved away from models concerned with individual-centred cognition and psychological coping, to a social approach that emphasized the links between cultural symbols, embodied states (lamenting, e.g.), and broader social norms regarding kinship, status, gender and the body (Bloch and Parry 1982; Hertz 1960). The idea was that although mourning may appear natural and spontaneous (even to the mourner him/herself), cross-cultural variations in patterns reveal that these responses to death have deep cultural roots and reinforce normative patterns of sociality, consciously or not.

Studies of death in Japan have generally subscribed to this format, shedding light on the continuing roles of ritual professionals, religious and secular alike, in the difficult task of restoring the rent fabric of kin and community in ways that attempt to adapt to cultural and social changes (Kawano 2010,

Rowe 2011, Smith 1974, Suzuki 2000, 2013; Tsuji 2006). Fewer anthropologists have focused on the dying process itself, although this has changed since the 1990s with increased concern over the rapid biomedicalization of death and rising costs of end of life care in an aging society (Becker 1999, Kondo-Arita 2012, Lock 2002, Long 2001, 2003, 2005).

What these approaches are able to show is that although for most people, the kind of stories that can or cannot be told about death and loss have been highly constrained by values, scripts, and traditions that are now forced to adapt to new historical circumstances, changes in family dynamics and public policies and institutional frameworks. What is less clear, however, is how grief and mourning are experienced by individuals as transformations of the self in relation to the deceased and the roles of rituals in bringing these affective and subjective experiences to a narrative level through the engagement with symbolically rich worlds. For example, Traphagan (2004) has argued that for bereaved Japanese older persons, performing rituals of care for the deceased is “a matter of doing concern about others” (180). While Traphagan acknowledges the centrality of “bodily and embodied linkages between the living and the dead” (130) and the way ritual “places the expression of emotional bonds into a structured framework of symbolic behavior that signifies human attachment and caring,” and even (quoting Rappaport) “radical identification or unity of self with other,” individual cases become reduced to variations on the theme of “concern” for collective well-being. This is not an unreasonable conclusion, and one that certainly aligns with characterizations of Japanese collective organization and sensitivity to the needs of others (*omoiyari*) (Doi 1970; Hayashi, Karasawa and Tobin 2009; Shimizu 2001), there is also something to be gained from drawing out the implications of the connections, attachments and identifications in mourning in ways that also highlight the individual experience of relationality with dead as a process of self-transformation, entanglement, struggles, failures, vulnerability and endurance (Battaglia 1990; Brison and Leavitt 1995; Ivy 1995; Rosaldo 1989; Valentine 2013). As Geertz (1973) notes in his analysis of the tension between modern social change and Javanese funeral custom, ethnography cannot take for granted that traditional rituals will produce social harmony (or collective well-being) or individual peace of mind. Cultural symbols and practices can find a way into personal narratives and grief work as catalysts in a process of meaning-making, emotional self-assessment, and opening up to new experiences of the deceased, but they do not determine the content. In the examples briefly described in this essay, I will attempt to illustrate these processes as they animate the relationships between carer and cared-for in small, but deeply meaningful ways.

## **2. The weight of loss, the lightness of being**

The interview had ended, and the voice recorder was switched off and stowed again in my bag. I could see that Imai-san was exhausted, managing a weak smile before slipping behind the counter of her cafe and pouring us some cold tea. Imai-san always had a cool, relaxed demeanor, and knew how

to hold back when her customers wanted to talk, but on this occasion, she sat and talked with me for over an hour, mainly about her mother. Two years prior, when I began my research on family carers in urban Japan, her mother had been hospitalized for injuries following a serious fall, and soon after, began having some troubling symptoms of dementia. Imai-san thought it best to move her to from her village in northern Japan to Kyoto. I had met Imai-san's mother on a few occasions as Imai-san became one of my close research informants, and was charmed by her skill at storytelling and her kind smile. By the time that I came back to Kyoto to conduct follow-up research in 2016, Imai-san's mother had died a few months prior. Like Powdermaker taking fieldnotes about mourning in Lesu (Palgi and Abramovitch 1984, 386), I was feeling that ethnographer's seasickness of excitement, humility and guilt as we spent the afternoon slowly recalling the memories of those last days of decline, hospice, and death.

The cold tea felt refreshing in the sweltering heat of mid-August. The summer holiday of Obon, when families welcome the dead back to their homes and renew their connection to past generations, had just come to a close, so I asked if she did anything special for her mother.

I spent yesterday writing thank-you cards to people. You get letters for the first Obon, or 'Uibon', and sometimes there's money too, kind of like 'incense money'. But I didn't know what to do for a return gift (*okaeshi*)! I was a little worried, so I asked an old woman in our neighbourhood, and she explained that I should buy some sweets worth about half the amount of the gift. So I asked her about what the bereaved person should write, and she said something like anything thoughtful would be fine. When I thought about it, I wonder if a long time ago this sort of thing at funerals and obon and things was meant as a way of helping each other out, since most people were poor and it would be hard to lose the help of a family member, so they helped each other out. Of course now it is just a custom, or ceremony, and we don't really have much feeling for it. If I was back in the village the first Obon would have been a big affair with all the relatives, but since her bones are here in my home still, my sister came and we just had a small ceremony."

Since Imai-san's mother was Christian, they purchased a compartment in the church ossuary with her name and photograph, but like Buddhist mourners, Imai-san felt like placing the cremains in the ossuary prematurely would make her mother lonely and sad (*'kawaiisō*), so for the time being she kept them in her home. "I don't think there is any proper time to put them in [the ossuary], but it just depends on when you feel it is right," she explained in a way that reminded me of the way carers try to gauge when it would be best to place a loved one into a care home.

As I was making my way to leave, she sighed dreamily, saying, "You know, I wonder about this feeling of loss (*soshitsukan*). I'm not sure what to do about it. Some people say that it starts to lift a bit, maybe after three years?"

Then, turning to me, she asked “What do you think?”

I sensed that Imai-san doubted that three years would make much of a difference, so I told her as honestly as I could, “I may not go away, but it will change.” After a pause, I remembered something she said earlier about the way she felt her mother was still present, so I added, “I am sure that she is touched to know you think of her.”

Despite years of following the topic of aging, care, and bereavement in Japan, I still hesitate when faced with that simple question that weighs most heavily on those, like Imai-san, who have experienced loss after providing care for years: how long will I feel this? Moments like this one in the café are humbling. What could I say? I was not the one who had been managing care for my mother for the last three years, relocating her hundreds of miles away from her lifelong home to small apartment, tending to her medical and care needs, making those final decisions about hospice and palliative care. What did I know about the loss that opens up, hungry and echoing, after care, attachment, intimacy, doubt, sorrow?

If there is something I have learned in of fieldwork with family carers and older people in Japan and more recently in the UK, it is that the sense of loss doesn't fully resolve, but it does gradually change into something less disruptive or debilitating over time. This may be especially so in a cultural context like Japan, where beliefs in a prolonged experience of interaction with the deceased is symbolically elaborated, where the love and fear of the dead are embedded in rituals and practices that transform and animate daily life. Bereaved family members not only talked about wanting to see or talk with the deceased as if they were still alive, but they were able to actually do these things when they visited the graves or the domestic altar (*butsudan*). “Of course we don't get a reply,” one of my informants told me with a grin as we knelt in front of her family grave together, “But we do it anyway. I couldn't imagine not doing it-- I would feel so sorry [for the dead]!”

The insistence that the dead desire the company of the living is a widespread belief, and motivates the desire on the part of the living to imagine feelings of abandonment and reassure them with attention and care. Death in Japan does not bring closure, but leaves a frayed and unfinished seam to the narrative of a relationship, calling to attention both the desire for continued connection, and the recognition that the deceased is no longer quite the same. Jean Langford (2016) called this mode of relating to the dead “ghostly poetics”, a phrase that evokes a particular semiotic register of the uncanny haunting that blends the experience of ‘inner’ feelings of grief and the vulnerability to supernatural phenomena. Poetics suggest a mode of relationality with the dead that animates uncertainty, where the ‘response’ of the dead is spoken in feelings and images, dreams and signs, arising unbidden from some elsewhere close by.

The porousness of life and death echoing through the images of ghostly poetics brings into question the centrality of the event of death within the larger context of loss and mourning. For Imai-san, as with most carers who looked after dying family members, loss and mourning permeated their experience before as well as after death. Over time, the rituals of care were not so much resistance to these unsettling feelings, as a means of communing with them and coming to understand them as a sign of being embedded in a shared world with the cared-for. I do not mean that the acute pain of bereavement is no different than the slow, stuttering ache of grief of years of caring for a frail or disabled older person, or that either are the same as the kind of emptiness that wells up again and again many years after the death. Yet all of these experiences of loss and suffering share an affinity with each other that in some ways helps carers create songs, laments, and poetic visions that find ways to transcend the suffering and re-emerge into the lightness of being in the world (Stevenson 2014).

### 3. Care in the ‘mass death society’

Caring for dying and for the deceased involves taking on a new empathic imagination (Galvin and Todres 2013) even “engrossment” (Noddings 2003) in the world of the other, and the attachments and entanglements woven into this mutuality are often painfully reveal the vulnerability of the self (Throop 2010, 774). As more and more people take up roles as carers, often for very extended periods of life, care and grief have come to saturate the fabric of everyday life, not like the sudden traumatic shock of an event like the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, but more like the lingering invisible seepage of radioactivity by the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plant. Life endures, but with a new sense of exposure (Morimoto 2012). How prevalent is this exposure to loss? Japan’s population in 2016 was 126.8 million, a decline of about one million since its peak ten years earlier. Because of Japan’s low fertility and strict immigration and naturalization policies, by 2060 the population is projected to have fallen to only 87 million, or roughly equivalent to what it was just after the Second World War. Some have already started to call Japan a “society of mass death” (*tashishakai*). In 2015, 26 percent of the population were over 65 and 1.3 million people died in Japan (the most since the end of the War). By about 2040, the older adult population will have grown to nearly 35% of the population, and 1.7 million people are expected to die, numbers that are historically unprecedented.

For several decades, Japan has maintained one of the lowest fertility rates in the world (1.4 children per mother), and as a result, the responsibility of both eldercare and mortuary care have fallen on fewer individuals than ever before. Not only this, but since the economic collapse and recession of the late twentieth century, through to the tragic disasters of 2011, the mood in Japan has become heavy, weighed down in feelings of disconnection (*muen*), placelessness (*ibasho ga nai*) and despair (*zetsubō*) (Allison 2013). Not only are more older people being “abandoned” by family members unwilling or unable to care, but as household lineages fade out, or become dispersed, the graves of the ancestors are being abandoned as well.

In times like this, one comes upon scenes like the one I stepped into on a visit to a cemetery in northern Kyoto. The cemetery was not large, but belonged to a very old temple now surrounded by residential buildings. Some of the gravestones appeared very old, and the stone had become rough, dark and discoloured. The carved writing on the central pillar stone, which indicates the names of the deceased of a household and their dates of death, had worn away from exposure. The only other person in the cemetery that day was a caretaker dressed in blue coveralls and black rubber boots. He was busy removing weeds around plot that had just been exhumed, carefully picking them out with his gloved hands. When I asked about the grave, he explained that because the temple was old, there were a lot of “muen-san” (unconnected spirits) that would be gradually removed to make room for new graves. When I asked how he came to be the one responsible for tidying up after the muen-san, the man explained how he had been looking for work after his retirement to help supplement his meagre pension income. He too, it turned out, had no children to support him, nor were there many jobs that would take an older person. Since he had volunteered at the temple before, he was able to find work there.

One issue with the graves is that a regular donation should be made to the temple to continue making use of the land. New mortuary practices, including ash scattering (Kawano 2010), tree burial (Boret 2014), and perpetual care (Rowe 2011) are all examples of ways people are trying to sustain a connection to the dead in response to demographic uncertainty (Suzuki 2013). While departing from the rigid prescriptions of memorial based on the early twentieth century family system (ie) (Tsuji 2006), they do not present a radical departure from of the tradition of long term memorialization, the importance of the care of remains, and the belief that the actions of the living are constantly supported or disrupted by the power of the dead.

The fear of abandonment in old age and death, exacerbated by demographic change and a sense of social disconnection, might be seen as an inversion of the mutuality of being and loving intimacy between the living and the dead. And yet, like the man in the cemetery, it also provides an opening to identify with and care for the dead. I stayed with the older caretaker for a while, as the autumn sun stretched our shadows. I watched him kneeling by the crumbling stones, picking out moss and weeds from the gravel with his finger, and occasionally he would tell me stories the monks had told him about the temple’s history, spanning back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He seemed to enjoy having some company as he worked, slowly inching his way across the plot.

### **Extending Mutuality of Care across Life and Death**

As Bilinda Straight observes among the Samburu of Kenya, the entangled agencies of the living and the dead means “death erupts again and again into life, demanding the reimagining of social relations” and “although the processes by which the deceased ‘become dead’ are multitudinously varied cross-culturally [...] the relationships between deceased persons and those who loved them undergo a series

of often painful transformations that are potentially hazardous for all those concerned” (Straight 2008, 102-103). If one were to substitute the word “old” for “dead” in Straight’s writing, it would come close to the experience of many carers. In cases where the person cared for was immobile (*netakiri*) or had dementia, suffering was never singular and sustained, but erupted into life before falling back into a new sense of normalcy, over and over. At other times, suffering was interrupted by the eruption of life: moments of lucidity, tenderness, or humour. Responding to these eruptions draws the carer into the world of aging, enabling a gradual process of detaching the person who was from the person one faces in the ever shifting moment by moment process of care. As in mourning the dead, this process is painful and potentially hazardous for both the carer and the cared-for.

The slow dying of the very old and the slow mourning of their carers ‘undoes’ the self (Butler 2004); “tragedy” writes Arthur Kleinman, is “the proper genre” of care (2009, 293). And yet even though losses remain, and wounds do not heal, the vulnerability of care also inaugurate transformations of subjectivity that makes us “more human” (Kleinman 2009, 293), or at least more relational. If becoming a carer entails being undone by the other, mourning is a process of putting that self back together, if never fully and never in the same way. In Japan, mortuary rituals tend to stretch out over weeks and years with the idea that the dead only slowly, painfully detach from this world, transforming in the process from a confused and potentially dangerous spirit (*shirei*) to a watchful though vulnerable ‘buddha’ (*hotoke*) and eventually to a more fully removed and venerable ancestor (*senzo*) (Danely 2014; Smith 1974). This transformation of the dead requires the continued care and attention of the living, whose emotional attachments must also be transformed as a new kind of intimacy and mutuality emerges.

Rituals and beliefs about the care of the dead meant that over the course of years, the carer continues to become a carer, even as the departed become the dead, each one making the other. The way care is given before the death matters, and has a direct influence on the carer’s reorientation after the death and the motivation to care for the dead. Psychological studies of family carers’ adjustment after bereavement agree that good relationships between carer and the cared for prior to death is followed more often by acceptance and well-being after (Bass and Bowman 1999; Bonanno et al. 2002; Carr et al. 2001). This may be because the good relationships had been based on mutuality, but in Japan at least, this continuity is supported through the ongoing ritual engagement and attention.

This was the case of Terada-san, a neighbour of mine whose husband died only four months before we first met. Terada-san cared for her husband in her home for the last year of his life, when he was mostly confined to his bed. She told me that after her husband died, she became severely depressed, losing seven kilograms from her already small frame in just a few weeks. However, she added, on the memorial ceremony on the 49<sup>th</sup> day after the death (when the restless *shirei* becomes a *hotoke*) the



monk conducting the memorial service tried to encourage Terada-san , saying “If you don’t take care of yourself, who will look after your husband!”

For some women, the idea that they would have to continue living in order to keep caring for their husbands might not be the most encouraging idea. But for Terada-san, who married her husband ‘for love’ (still an unusual choice at a time when arranged marriages were standard), the monk’s words hit just the right note. “So that’s what I do, I care for him the best I can” she told me, glancing into the next room where the new butsudan stood.

Some carers went even further in describing their relationship to the care-for, explaining that the desire to care arose naturally because they were the same “life” (inochi), and therefore it was up to the “stronger” part to compensate for the “weaker” part. In doing so, carers were able to make a distinction between themselves and care receivers, acknowledging the limits of empathic imagination and alterity, while at the same time, subsuming both selves into the same life through the practice of care. The responsibility for the care of the other arises out of this configuration of self and life as what Marshall Sahlins calls the “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013). This was just as important in death as it was in life, and especially so for older bereaved carers.

I sat with Terada-san, facing her butsudan. The portrait of her husband, who had died three years earlier, was still placed in the center, and on the higher shelves, a memorial plaque (ihai) bearing the inscription of his posthumous name, and another next to it, lettered in vermilion. It was just after the holiday of Obon and the day after my conversation with Imai-san at the café. The funeral portrait (iei) was adapted from a photo taken during his last trip out with his family to a hot springs resort, giving his smile an even deeper significance for Terada-san. And yet unlike the source photograph, the memorial portrait lacked contextual clues, rendering her husband present yet in some undefined elsewhere, ordinary yet other-worldly (Irizarry 2014, S163; Schattscheider 2003, 204). “He looks so nice in that picture, doesn’t he?” she said as she gazed up winsomely.

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

Terada-san then started to move, telling me that she wanted to show me something. She bent down slowly, opening a small cabinet underneath the butsudan and removing a pale turquoise blue cylindrical shaped ceramic jar. It almost looked like a small cookie jar, I think, as she set it down between us and took off the lid to shows me the bones of her husband inside. I was struck by how beautiful and delicate they were, like fragments of seashell, curved and broken into odd-shaped, yet

gentle curves. "This is my husband" she said, as she picked up a small piece of paper that was resting on top of the bones.

She picked up the paper, and unfolded it. On it, she had written his posthumous name, the date, and her own name. Terada-san explained how on each year on obon she wrote these notes, placed them in the jar and then on the last day of the following obon, she would burn them in her garden, hoping that the message and her thoughts would reach him somehow. She looked up at the photograph, still fingering the paper. She unfolded it, showing me how she had written on it the posthumous name of her husband and the date alongside her own name. "Each year I write one of these and place it in here with him, and then on Obon, I burn it, right out here in the garden. It is my way of sending him a message."

On the opposite side of the small room was an empty space where a three years prior, the adjustable bed had been placed so that her husband could be cared for at home. In many homes of carers, these large adjustable beds were placed in the same room as the butsudan, as this was often the largest and most easily accessible room of the house. This was the case for Terada-san, and during our interviews she would often glance over to the spot where he used to lay as she spoke about him, as if imagining him still there. In one instance, she told me that she would sometimes find him sitting up in bed with a pen and paper writing his own notes early in the morning. The penmanship was impressive, but the words would usually get confused in the second or third line. They would always start out the same: "Thank you." He would then try to include the names of specific people, like his daughter or wife, but he might get them mixed up or write the names wrong. The sentence would then trail off. Then, on the next page, "Thank you." When he was younger, Terada-san explained, he was trained as a monk, and so he had to have very neat penmanship. He was proud of this skill, and somehow he knew that he could write his note. Terada-san kept some of these old notes, and showed them to me. Now was her turn to write notes to him. Notes that acted as what Nozawa (2015) recognizes as "phatic" communication;-- just letting her husband know that she is there, continuing to care for him and enduring life before they are reunited.

The ongoing attachment and intimacy afforded through the preservation of the bones, the notes, the butsudan, and other symbols and rituals gave Terada-san a reason to endure and to come to terms with doubts and regrets, even if her wounds would not heal easily or without pain. Spousal carers living in the UK also felt a mutuality of being with their spouse, as explained by Mark, a 92 year old man whose wife died a few months before we met:

"That's what life is about. We just made it through togetherness [...]she had a quiet death and I suppose everything went smoothly, if you can refer to death like that. No, as I say it was just part of life, looking after her. It was *an extension of the other.*"

As I spoke to Mark, we sat in his small front parlor, in two large chairs facing an old television set. There were small framed photos of he and his wife on vacation many years earlier, but the only other sign of his wife was waterproof cushion placed on the chair where I sat. It was her chair. I asked Mark if he had received any support grieving after his wife passed away.

“Life is gone, you know? There's nothing for me to look after. You know? I had - well, as I say, I just miss her simple as that. I can't put it any other way you know. “

Mark's case helped me to appreciate both the similarities between the UK and Japan as well as the difference that cultural and material items can play for the reorganization of one's self narrative in bereavement. Terada-san could (re)enter the space of care once used for her living husband to now care for his remains, even speak to him or pass notes as she liked. Mark, on the other hand, had a remarkable sense of mutuality with his wife, but lacked an object that he could care for once she finally passed away. For him, this meant that life was simply gone rather than transformed. Consequently, he struggled in his own self-transformation in bereavement. His case points to the importance of continuing care after death, of mourning and memorial that could extend his “togetherness” past death.

### **Mourning, Image, Imagination**

To say that mutuality merely sustains caring relationships from life into death would be an oversimplification of the very fraught business of mourning. There is something else about death that requires us to consider mutuality of being alongside what Stevenson (2014) describes as the “mournful life.” To live mournfully means “acknowledging the way our lives are not our own, the way we are called and call others” and to “work out new ways to love, new was to imagine the other that take this observation, that life is beside itself, seriously” (174). For carers, especially those who are older themselves, the loss of the cared for inaugurates a new imagination of being with the other in death, and it is often an image that mediates this imagination is a gentle ghostly poetics. This final case illustrates the connection between care, mourning, image and imagination.

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

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

I winced a little and moved closer as she stubbed out the last half of her cigarette. Complaints about the body and mind were often one of the first ways older Japanese people I met would try to relate

their experience to me. It was a way of setting the stage and performing age, but her narrative wouldn't end there. "I went [to the doctor] because I want to climb Mt. Fuji in August— and I don't like being told no! So I won't quit!" She continued,

This will be my third time. I went ten years ago, when I was 71, and before that when I was 70. Do you know the reason that I want to go this time? Well I was going to go a third time, but my husband said that he was worried about me, so I didn't end up going. But last year, May, my husband passed away. So this time, I have decided to take his photo and climb Fuji-san again. When he died, I really felt like there was no reason to go on living. It was better to die, I thought! I was really down. Until the 49<sup>th</sup> day anniversary ceremony, it was just really bad. But when I figured it out, I felt my energy come back. Now I am living for this. Climbing Mt. Fuji with his photograph is my purpose in life (*mokuhyō*).

Yamada-san's goal to see the view from the top of Mt. Fuji with her husband, was not simply about a quest for generativity and achievement as an older person. It was also about the importance of performing mutuality and loss as a means to move toward a more animated relationship to her dead husband. The intense grief after the death, the traumatic sense of finality and separation, revealed how deeply Yamada-san's self was entangled with that of her husband. Her loss is what Throop (2010) calls the "presencing forth of an absence" (774), the gap in the self that was filled by the other was ripped open again. In line with Buddhist beliefs of the transition of the newly dead to hotoke on the 49<sup>th</sup> day after death, however, Yamada-san too felt things change; the wound was beginning to heal. Gradually a plan took shape to re-presence her husband in her life. But why Mt. Fuji?

When I asked Yamada-san, she smiled and told me "it was all thanks to the Grand Canyon"

[Grand Canyon no okage de]. Having both worked all their lives, she explained, she and her husband took at long anticipated vacation in the USA after he had retired and before he became ill.

My husband saw the Grand Canyon and he said that he felt that he should forget about all of his worries, all his feeling bad for himself, just think about living from that day on, taking care of each other (*mamoru*). It was just so tremendous! You look out and just see sky! We rode one of those little planes over it, and I couldn't believe how huge it was. So it was all thanks to the Grand Canyon.

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

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

Yamada-san did eventually make it up Fuji-san with her husband's photo, but not on the first try. Weather conditions were poor, and the trip was harder than she was prepared to endure. Try as she might, she only made it to the 7th rest station before she and her daughter had to descend. When she reached the bottom, feeling understandably defeated, she noticed that a strange cloud had formed over the mountain, like a halo floating overhead. Yamada-san knew that it was more than just a random meteorological event. "When I looked up and saw the clouds," she wrote to me later, "I thought, 'Papa was feeling sorry that I came all the way to Mt. Fuji and I had to come down without seeing the top,' so he showed this to me, and I felt so grateful."

It is at times like these, that one finds the world animated.

The following summer, Yamada-san completed her ascent to take another photo of herself, her daughter, and the portrait of her late husband.

What might we make of the link between care, mourning, and living on after death? It may seem obvious that for Yamada-san, her mission to bring her husband to see the spectacular view from Mt. Fuji would not make sense without a sense of shared mutuality of being. Though dead, her husband was just as alive and capable of receiving care as she was. Yamada-san could physically bring her husband to the mountain, and in a sense back to the promise to care that the two of them made looking out into the awesome expanse of the Grand Canyon. As a face, an image, and an object of memorial, she could be sure that her husband was present and attentive to her gesture (Schattschneider 2003). But even more, she and her daughter created a new image with the three of them, a new memory of the memorial that could be shared and circulated, even to the curious anthropologist.

[insert image about here]

Looking closely, we see the picture within the picture, the one present in his absence, the one who endures without effort or exhaustion, the face that preserves in some way the vulnerability and its obligation. Not the uncanny and alienated from the person, but an animated image, alive and able to

accompany Yamada-san up the mountain. It is this face that initiates Yamada-san's actions, propels her to defy her doctors and daughters and to risk her life on the mountain.

The next year, at 83, Yamada-san no longer has the strength, much to her daughters' relief, to have another try at Mt. Fuji. Instead has taken up singing and karaoke to keep her spirits up. "When I see a country on TV where my husband I had been, or sing a song that I used to sing with my husband at karaoke, I still cry" she wrote. "My husband was always saying 'You better not die before me!' So I have to whip my old body into shape and live for my husband's part as well (*shujin no bun made*). I am just living on and hanging on through this loneliness and sadness."

Yamada-san's story, a story yet to come to any closure, is not merely an example of the power of perseverance and endurance in old age— a story of enduring endurance— though it is that too. Yamada-san's earnest desire to complete the climb can be considered a part of an ongoing process of mourning as narrative transformation of the self— refiguring, reconstituting and recovering herself by submerging divergent selves (the lonely, depressed, self) beneath the lightness of mutuality. Her personhood was determined by the way that she endured her moral commitments and responsibilities not merely to herself, but to her deceased husband whose image and the imaginative world it inhabited, were central to the story. Climbing the mountain is a form of memorial, and though it entails effort, discomfort, risk, it is also a form of caring for the self in old age, making use of those final stores of energy and will and living them into a project of mutual becoming

## Conclusion

Memorial rituals in Japan offer narrative scaffolding upon which carers can set out on the long process of readjusting their world in the absence of the cared-for. In the case of Terada-san, the rituals of memorial we inextricably merged with her own memories and associations. The notes in the jar were coded replies to her husband's garbled 'thank you' letters. And even the memorial portrait contained a memory of her husband's last family trip before his illness. Though outwardly observing customary acts of memorial, each had a meaning that went beyond an abstract notion of the other world, and motioned to something much closer at hand.

In taking the risk to cast the characters and emplot a narrative of possible selves, past and future, Yamada-san would literally sur-mount the odds, standing, exhausted, but above the clouds, and there she created a new image.

The image, like so many other iconic mountaintop snaps, like the hundreds of others that were no doubt taken that same day on Mt. Fuji, is one of hope and of survival, and also an image of mourning.

The shape of endurance is moulded by the conditions of life, our engagement with them, our efforts and affordances. What I wanted to highlight in this talk was the ways that enduring can become an occasion for long engagements and slow mourning, for transformations of the self afforded through and not in spite of the vulnerability of dependence and old age.

The desire for intimacy with the deceased persists into old age, even in spaces like care homes for people with dementia. It is a narrative that endures when other possible selves have fallen away.

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<sup>i</sup> See Tsuji 2006 for a detailed example of incense money and the return gift as mortuary ritual