# The Rite of Immortality: Preserving Symbolical Immortality Through Memory and Memorabilia

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#### Research question

What to consider as a creative and biological symbolic immortality through the lens of memory? How is it formed and why is it significant?

#### Abstract

This project derived from my personal fascination with creativity, the imaginary, death, and memory and how they are interconnected. I am interested in the human need to depict, remember, and the need to feel remembered. Many attempts have been made to achieve immortality through different methods, time periods, and cultures; let it be physical or the immortality of the soul; however, the one I will be researching is creative and biological symbolic immortality perceived through the lens of memory. Within that, I am intrigued by the role of death and life in the concept of everlasting life. Whether or not, people have been intentionally working towards making themselves immortal and why the need to leave something behind? How does the perception of an individual alter the reality of the depiction and is it even able to subsist without active engagement? Is being forgotten an even bigger fear than death itself and who is immortality for? I am interested in the medium of immortality and how most of the things we consider eternal, if not properly preserved, could be easily lost.

## Longing (for loved ones and things to remain)

“I remember staring into her eyes not saying a word as time stood still. I finish my espresso and share a small smile with the world. A smile with a dash of pain and a spring of love. For I know the memories we wrote will never be forgotten. Hidden forever until awoken.” (Anonymous, 09 Nov. 2022)

It was a rainy November evening in Ghent when I received these words from someone, whom I have been trying to forget for a long time now. These verses burned me like a sting of a wasp that always keeps returning and wounding me in the exact same spot. Despite the pain they carry, I immediately ran home and packed them in a little beige box, I bought my first pointe shoes in, along with all the other memories I hold dear. Today they might hurt too much, but I cannot risk losing them, they are way too precious. As I lay on the bed that night crying, I start thinking about all the things in that box. I close my eyes and travel back in time to Budapest to the exhibition of Frida Kahlo, where she tells me the story of her tragic life, I cry for her, and for my grandpa, who is in my mind still sitting on that sunny terrace of Napotnikova street wearing a white undershirt and classic Wayfarer Ray-Ban sunglasses, sipping on his spritzer. He smiles at me. I inhale and open my eyes. In my hands, I am now holding a little pocketknife he gave me from of his trips to Venice, which folds inside a metal form of a Gondola boat. My eyelids suddenly feel heavy again, when the floor below my feet slowly begins to feel unstable. It is summer 2020. We are in Amsterdam on our little boat, and I am watching you light up a cigarette. You are sitting silently on the top of the deck looking in the distance as the sun sets. I wonder what you are thinking about right now… Somehow, I am still asleep, but I awake from the unconscious. It feels different from what I have experienced before. In front of me, there is complete darkness, but the sound that was before slightly blurred now starts refining. It is the sound of applause. I am standing on a stage with my head lightly tilted before the audience. I have just performed the 3rd Odalisque variation of Le Corsaire. My feet are so used to these steps, they take over and move without my mind’s orders. I relive all the places, the emotions, and the people so vividly as if it had just happened. My tears dry up and I feel untroubled again as the darkness of the night slowly pulls me back to the world of dreams. When I wake up in the morning I look again through these verses. They are no longer heavy. I now understand, after you have repeatedly broken my heart by disappearing throughout these years, I grieve you, even though you are still alive. The poems you once wrote are now a part of that box and my precious time travel destination for dark, intolerable days. You continue living on in my consciousness and your poetry serves as a portal, now storing dear memories that every day move a step closer to envisioned divine immortality.

As the morning bird wakes up late, the sun is still cuddling behind the blanket of clouds. Rise and shine my little morning doves, there is apple sprits waiting for you. (Anonymous, 2020)

Immortality: the quality of being able to live or last forever or the quality of being very special and famous and therefore likely to be remembered for a long time.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Many aims have been made to achieve immortality through different methods, time periods, and cultures. Each religion has its own interpretation of life, death, and what happens after it. Numerous are known for promising an afterlife, like Judaism, Islam, and finally, Christianity, which has through the decades successfully profited off people’s guilt and fear of death. From the Egyptians saving bodies in the tombs in pursuit of the spiritual afterlife, to the Alchemist's desire to obtain the elixir of life to become immortal or the Buddhistic belief of reincarnation that also suggests continuity. Within the realm of physical immortality, already briefly touched upon by Alchemists in their health-focused way of living, cryonics[[2]](#footnote-1) emerged in the seventies in the faith that one day life expansion will become possible. In this century the most desired achievement of eternal life is the uploading of consciousness into cyberspace, also known as digital immortality.

Let it be the physical or the immortality of the soul; however, the one I will be diving into is the symbolic immortality that is ensured through the lens of memory. This term was established by Harvard psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton, MD, referring to what comes before us and what remains of us after death, enabling us to participate in an ongoing life without denying the actuality of death. Symbolic implies that it conveys an idea, intention, or feeling with the absence of practical influence.[[3]](#endnote-2) He divided it further into five different categories: biological, creative, natural, theological, and experimental.[[4]](#endnote-3) This thesis will focus on two aspects, the creative, which captures human creations and lasting influences on others which enter the human flow beyond the self, and the biological, generational continuality, within it. I am going to look at both through the personal experience and family. With this thesis, I wish to verbalize the concept of symbolic immortality and its attributes and propose it as a new possible method of dealing with loss.

Experience occurs when our minds assign forms to our perceptions. Our sensory data and recognition are therefore closely related. Through the perception of senses, our inner psychic structures enable the possibility for recognition and assign meaning to these inner forms that inside of our minds exist as either clear or vague images and symbols. The most general psychic organization of these inner images and symbols takes place around mutual oppositions like connection and separation or movement and stasis. The most extreme form of stasis is death. Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson in their theory imply the finality of death and the human need for historical connection beyond an individual life. They believe that we, humans, need to develop symbols, imagery, and concepts in order to grant a sense of significance to our experience, which is a process most essential to what they called symbolical immortality. Without this everyday development and a sense of belonging would not be possible. Symbolic immortality is conclusively an ability to participate in everyday life without the necessity of denying the inevitable death.[[5]](#endnote-4)

So where does this longing for eternal life initially come from, the need to feel remembered? Perhaps it is the fear that the life you lived becomes meaningless once you cease to exist, the fear of death itself, or the notion of not understanding how something that once lived and created can now simply vanish. Could it be the need for connection to others and back to ourselves? Maybe it is a reminder to upcoming generations or even other species of our accomplishments and the doom we brought upon ourselves. It could be our sense of self-importance, a deeply egotistical point of view, or even a political statement, a reminder of one’s achievements, beliefs, and legacy. And frankly, it may be all of the above.

## Crossing (liminal space between life, loss and death)

*In her journal Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being, Sabina Spielrein states: “In the ‘Mothers’[[6]](#footnote-2), there is no light or dark, no above or below, no opposites; differentiation from the primal substance, the Great Mother, has not yet occurred. With differentiation, one is, for the first time, consecrated to life and, death (de-differentiation[[7]](#footnote-3)). Death’s source lies in life itself and vice versa. A child’s conception and development occur at the mother’s expense; she is often endangered by the birth. The mother is depleted. Since she is not destroyed completely, the death component requires a substitute, a sacrifice. The plant is pulled out (it is born) while sprinkling either the blood of a sacrificial animal or urine. Both are death products (urine, excreta).” (Spielrein, 1994)*

Spielrein, suggesting destruction as the basis of creation, further describes: “No change can take place without destruction of the former condition.” In her text, she points out the rituals of different cultures as a way to honor new life through sacrifice or inanimate symbols. She talks of our modern conscious thought process and its disability to conform to our complex, impossible-to-grasp, psychic ideas. Such images, nevertheless, can be found in the mythological and imaginative creations of our ancestor’s consciousness, on which she largely bases her examples.[[8]](#endnote-5) Agreeing with her thoughts on death and life overlapping, I recognize a strong impact of our ancestral presence. Not only to base our beliefs on but to thank them for our existence as they sacrificed theirs. Therefore, the biological component unravels here through myth and ritual, and generations of our ancestors.

Within this chapter, I wish to expose another concept; the one of ambiguous loss. This term was first used by Pauline Boss, former psychotherapist, researcher, writer, and currently a professor at the University of Minnesota, describing unclear loss with no possibility of closure existing either on a physical or psychological level.[[9]](#endnote-6) I shall treat this idea in the same way as the one of Lifton’s symbolic immortality and Spielrein’s sexual instinct, fundamentally existing on a spectrum between life and death in the means of understanding how I can grieve a person, who I had lost, not by the cause of death, but distance.

The last time we talked on the phone, you told me you wanted to die. In your eyes, death is the ultimate answer to everything; a space where all you had ever wondered or doubted suddenly reaches perfect clarity. You were so convinced of what you were saying. I got worried and tried to talk you out of it, but you would not listen. When I hung up the phone that night, I was not able to fall asleep. I could not stop but feel like you are already dead. As if the conversation we just had never even happened, and I made you up in my mind to say things that I myself could never say out loud.

“Other people may well be unaware that all who actually engage in philosophy aright are practising nothing other than dying and being dead.” (Plato, 2002)

Then… I don’t know what you are thinking about then when you are unconscious. The only thing I remember is, if before I felt an excruciating pain after everything was gone. I thought to myself if I lean on one side, this might represent life, and if I lean to the other, this might represent death. On either side, the pain was gone. I started leaning towards one side, and then to the other, again to one, and then to the other. Finally, God himself must have chosen that I must live.” (Sonja Turk, my grandmother talking about her near-death experience, 31 December 2022)

Leaning between life and death, the line between the two fades. The most evident occurrence of such a situation for a human is a near-death experience, which recently befall my grandma. In the summer of 2022 she, due to a medical complication, clinically died for a couple of seconds. By some miracle that had blessed our family, she woke up. When she arrived back from the hospital my family and I helped her recover. She needed to relearn how to walk and use her muscles, as her entire muscle memory and strength collapsed from spending a month on a hospital bed. She had trouble remembering things, that would any other day seem like common knowledge to her. You see, my grandma is a big fan of crossword puzzles, which suddenly got so much harder. I asked her about her experience when this had just happened and now, six months later again. The biggest gap between how she thought back then and how she is thinking now seemed to be her own interpretation of what has happened. Before she could only describe what, she had felt at that moment, but now she has assigned meaning to it. She saw it as an allegory for life and death and what exists in between. What also strikes me about her story is how she described those few seconds. If before she felt excruciating pain after all of it was gone. She told me she did not feel cold or warm, all she was left with is a sense of ease. She did not think of life or death as something she had to fear, but rather as something that was out of her reach for someone or something else to decide.

Raymond Moody in his book *Life after Life* describes how common it is for people to encounter pleasant feelings at the beginning of their near-death experience. He continues by mentioning how for most of us an out-of-body experience is hard to imagine since we so strongly identify with our physical body. Believing that the majority perceived ‘the mind’ way more ethereal than the body, he thinks of the mind as something that consists of electrical and chemical activity which is stored in the brain that is a part of the physical body.[[10]](#endnote-7) While I cannot argue the latter, I do somehow disagree with the beginning of his statement. The mind transfers ideas and influences, while the body just lives and dies. The mind can think of ideas that are able to outlive the last human, while the body is just its carrier. A very important and necessary, but nevertheless impermanent carrier.

Charon was the name of a boatman who in Greek mythology escorted souls over the waters of Hades into the depths of the underworld. The Greeks believed in placing the coins on the eyes or mouths of the deceased before burial to assure the dead the payment for Charon’s ride. Because of his role, he often occurred in katabases; mythical narratives where the main protagonist descends into the underworld in order to retrieve something from the dead. This journey across the River Acheron (or sometimes the River Styx) represents a liminal space, the space in between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Despite Hades' implication for the journey to only exist in one way, he granted some living individuals a passage into the underworld, for which he got punished.[[11]](#endnote-8) Leaning between life and death, my grandma was possibly a passenger on Charon’s boat present in the liminal space of her near-death experience, whom he might have graciously granted an exit without the price of payment.

The presence of death in our lives is constant and perpetual. Ultimately, it is the only inevitable price for life itself. While living, we often like to push the idea of death aside, as we are well aware of our temporality. Ever since the development of modern medicine in the 19th century, which lengthened people’s life expectancy and delayed the thought of passing into a faraway future,[[12]](#endnote-9) humans took initiative to tell death when and how it should not interfere with life and when it is the “appropriate”[[13]](#footnote-4) time of its arrival – meaning we have succeeded in living a fulfilled and long-lived life.

Considering fear of death and hope for a continuous life full of meaning as the two unavoidable parts of the human condition in time we found ways to satisfy those needs. We have only learned to accept death in a legal way, to write wills and leave heritages. Those are all tangible things of simpler understanding than trying to grasp a concept that no one can explain or reassure of. While many cultures found their way in offering speculative beliefs through religion, which entirely ruled out the finality of death by an image of an afterlife, Lifton offered a new solution for agnostics which embraces the reality of death and does not disregard its timelessness.[[14]](#endnote-10)

## Preserving (memories and memorabilia)

Memory: the ability to remember information, experiences, and people.[[15]](#endnote-11)

Remembering occurs when all the sensory components[[16]](#footnote-5) of memory, which are usually allocated in different parts of the brain, get pieced back together. Whenever a memory is created, its essential information gets stored in the deep-brain structure known as the hippocampus located next to the amygdala, the emotional center of the brain, which marks certain memories as important or emotionally strong. The different components of the memory are later sent mainly to the cerebral cortex in the outer layer of the brain. The brain’s frontal lobes are responsible for recalling a memory. Fragments of the memory are pulled back from different regions in the cerebral cortex where they are stored. Depending on what senses you used to receive a memory, those areas would react in the moment of retrieving the data. If you are trying to remember someone’s face, your brain would recall information from its visual region. Together, all these components forming a unique neuronal pattern lie passively until the moment of remembering, when they finally get reactivated.[[17]](#endnote-12)

As memory blurs throughout time, its accuracy decreases. The process of romanticization follows as a new path to re-envisioning our lives and deaths through the lens of memory.[[18]](#endnote-13) Memory and imagination go hand in hand, and so it often happens, we end up recalling the past more longingly than we experienced it at the time. It is not only there to remind us of what we have learned but is also a ‘mood repair strategy’ actively trying to ease out the intensity of heavy experiences. The thoughts we enjoy thinking about tend to stay with us more because of repeatedly rehearsing and recalling them in contrast to the negative experiences we do not practice and sooner forget; Karl-Heinz T. Bauml and Oliver Kliegl in their work *Learning and Memory: A Comprehensive Reference* call this ‘retrieval-induced forgetting’. Traumatic memories are an exception and are often persistent and invasive.[[19]](#endnote-14)

We often associate memory with the past, however, that is not its only purpose. Long-term memory is where we store information more permanently. It divides into subcategories of declarative and non-declarative memory, where declarative further separates into semantic and episodic.[[20]](#endnote-15) If the first consists of the general world knowledge and understanding of concepts, facts, and the meanings of words, the second stands as Endel Tulving’s theory of a hypothetical memory system that exists as a tool that allows humans to travel back in time, and reexperience the past. While his theory, especially in his early writings about it, has been widely criticized for the absence of practical research and supposed lack of importance for certain researchers, I think it divides and describes the part of the memory that crucial for the imaginative process of remembering. He presupposes that episodic memory evolved out of semantic later in time of evolution and that it emerges in the later stage of the development of an individual. Especially mammals and birds, among many non-human animals have very well-developed awareness systems, like declarative and semantic memory, which enable them in requiring large amounts of crucial information that help them survive. He further speculates that early humans were similar, and that episodic memory emerged rather recently as an “’embellishment’ of the semantic memory system,” (Tulving, 2002) the origins of which are unknown and can only be speculated. Tulving continues it could possibly represent an instance of the Baldwin-effect instead of a case of a (neo)Darwinian theory. In the conclusion he writes that everyone’s possession of this particular time-travel ability makes it harder for us to find it fascinating and unique.[[21]](#endnote-16) However, that does not overwrite the fact that this ability is any less special than the experiences of it are.

“’Memory’ is commonly envisaged as both the facility to remember and the mental representation or trace of what is remembered” write Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey in their Essay *Remembering as a Cultural Process.* We often treat them as objects that must be kept or preserved, displaying and narrating them carefully in the museums of our minds.[[22]](#endnote-17)

### Memorabilia and Grief

Our limited capacity for memorizing consequently at times causes memories to fall deep into the pit of unconsciousness. In order to pull them back out from that pit, we need extra stimulation of our senses. The ethereal value of memorabilia, a physical manifestation of remembering, lies in the need to preserve memories, either someone else’s or your own. In her chapter *Melancholy objects* from the book *Mortality*, Margaret Gibson explains how objects represent an essential role in grieving because of their embeddedness in the construction of the identity and connection between people. She draws a difference between dead objects, the objects that have lost their associations with people and are not experienced in an affective way, and the objects of the dead, the melancholy objects embodying absence. In her text, she specifically focuses on melancholy objects that are central to grieving and memorialize mourning and with time lose their value or transform into objects that remind one of the times of grieving.[[23]](#endnote-18) She introduces the concept of cathexis, defined as the investment of mental or emotional stimulus in a person, object, or idea. The word derives from the from the Greek word kathexis, meaning "holding." [[24]](#endnote-19) It is present in psychoanalysis to frame the emotional life of objects, that would express itself in a form of sentimental attachment to a keepsake. Through the witnessing of death, we become aware of the metamorphosis of our own materiality. The absence of the departed is filled in by our burning desire for their bodily return so often this tangible transitional quality of human nature gets replaced by a representation or an object. In grief, the inner and outer psychic reality[[25]](#footnote-6) are torn apart, as the deceased’s image does not exist in the present time and lacks external reality. As they now exist only in memories, their captured, frozen-in-time histories, face daily oblivion of being forgotten without external objects of memorabilia. Through death or ambiguous loss, most simple objects can gain emotional importance, regardless of their other measures of value. Humans as highly visual creatures often are not able to remember an immaterial abstraction of the spirit itself which causes the material objects to be not only associated with the deceased but are intertwined with the substance of their very being and are consequently a tool for remembering and additionally serve as a memento mori.[[26]](#endnote-20)

The controversy of memorabilia, despite its importance for personal meaning and connection, is one of being easily trivialized as ‘sentimental’ through the thought of excessive emotion and possessiveness. Excessive attachments to objects could be seen and potentially pathologized as an over appreciation of the material. In order to prevent that it is important to differentiate between the keepsakes that serve solely as mementos, which ease the separation anxiety and provide a symbol of working through and eventually overcoming the loss, and ‘linking objects’ which symbolically merge two individuals’ psychic boundaries and can hamper the success of grieving.

## Recalling; does immortality exist without remembering?

“If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” (Anglican Bishop and philosopher Dr. George Berkeley, 16th century)

It is impossible to deny the actuality of existence, only because no one is around to acknowledge it. That is if this existence is ever-present and timeless, such as eternal truths, which are, despite being discovered by humans true and present no matter if we actively engage with them or not. On the other hand, meaning and memory are rather subjective qualities, they need to be formed or activated in order to subsist. Therefore, they are incapable of existing by themselves without the active involvement of another person. Symbolic immortality is a projection, forming through the lens of a memory of an individual, where no two lenses share the same base curve and are scratched in different places. Despite thinking about the same subject, all the projections of it are in some way influenced and biased and can only serve as an approximation to reality, which because we are all experiencing it at the same time also shares several truths. Nothing that is human or can be perceived by human senses can ever be eternal and only contain one verity. Symbolic immortality is in my opinion consequently necessary ensured through other people’s perceptions and is not able to survive outside of that. Moreover, immortality is in this thesis meant not as an endless, but rather a life-prolonging quality everyday facing its potential vanishment.

Life-extending sooner than never-ending quality of symbolic immortality is not only unavoidable, but also important by virtue of reminding us of temporality and appreciation. It often exists as an unconscious process or a coping mechanism waiting to be acknowledged and pursued as a ritual that will bring us closer to our ancestors and will enable the humanity to pursue purposeful living beyond the life of an individuality. It helps to embody and potentially materialize loss through objects in order to grant us with more time for grieving and to secure the process of remembering. It is important to recognize the problematics of such ritual, as they can quickly turn foul, nevertheless they do bring a sense of ease and stability. Holding onto such objects is important to me because it reminds me of pleasant experiences I shared with people, even though they are no longer a part of my life.  
  
Conclusion

Not only the living shares a sense of temporality, but it is also unfortunately the characteristics of anything that can be seen, measured, touched, smelled or heard. We refer to the temporality of humans as mortality; a hard-to-grasp, often devastating and inevitable concept, which we decided to fight with the cure we called immortality. This manifested itself in many different directions like physical or religious immortality or the immortality of the soul, however the one that caught my attention was Robert Jay Lifton’s and Eric Olson’s symbolical immortality that unlike other types of immortality accepts the finality of death, does not deny its timeless aspect. In comparison to other types of immortalities, it is much more selfless and implies the need for connection beyond the individual life to our ancestorial history and a greater meaning of life. Leaning between life and death, through the writings of Sabrina Spielrein’s death instinct, to point at the biological aspect, to the notion of ambiguous loss, offering symbolic immortality as a rite for those who are stuck in the liminal spaces between life and death, to memorabilia as a physical manifestation of the memory, and my personal experience with death and loss, I try to propose symbolical immortality as a ritual for overcoming temporality we as humans, need to face.

You know what they say?” [followed by a short silence] “There’s nothing like chicken on a grill.” He smiles, and I smile back. I think neither one of us knew exactly what that meant. He did those things sometimes; said things just to break the silence.

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6. The ‘Mother’ is motherly, potentially creative eternal living entity from which all life springs and that represents its image in the depth of the unconscious existing outside of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
7. In dedifferentiation cells return to an earlier stage of development in order to grow. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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25. “An individual's internal reality corresponds to a collection of processes, representations, and affects that are essentially (but not only) unconscious, which [Sigmund Freud](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/medicine/psychology-and-psychiatry-biographies/sigmund-freud) referred to as "psychical reality." It thus contains the representations of the world that the subject has formed, fantasies stemming from unconscious desires, and universal fantasy structures: the primal fantasies. … External reality, also called material reality, subsumes the objects of our physical environment, the subject's body, and the subject's inscribed place in society.” (Chartier, Jean-Pierre) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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