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# The postself in blogs about terminal illness

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Abstract

When confronted with the approaching end of their lives, people can turn to narrating and sharing personal stories in an online blog as a way of creating a legacy. In doing so, as well as creating a legacy, they may construct an online postself that will survive their physical death. Through the ritual practices to 'keep the dead alive', performed within the online ritual spaces that these blogs become, an online transcendent reality can arise in which the postself can continue to exist. Additionally, a reconstruction of this identity can take place as the bereaved take over the deceased's blog. Based on our qualitative analysis of five personal blogs on terminal illness, and drawing on Shneidman's concept of the postself, we describe the ways in which both the dying and the bereaved contribute to, and maintain, the narrative construction of postself in the demarcated framework of weblogs.

**Keywords:** Postself, online, terminal illness, death, blogs, narrative

## Introduction

"Unfortunately readers, I'm out." [1]

These words not only mark the end of an online diary, they mark the end of a life. The internet increasingly provides us with options to narrate and share our lives, and our deaths, with the world. The words above – written by Hans, a Dutch terminally ill man

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[1] Originally written in Dutch: "Helaas lezers, ik ben vertrokken."

shortly before his death – are a case in point. He kept a blog in the two years before he died, writing about himself, his life and impending death in the final stage of his illness. Hans' weblog is not an isolated case. The online world is, as philosophers Marjolein de Boer and Jenny Slatman (2014, 17) describe – drawing on Broom (2001) among others, an important place for narrating and sharing personal stories. For example, as is explored here, when people are faced with illness and death.

In this article, we look at blogs of Dutch people who were terminally ill at the time of writing and posting and who are now deceased. Blogs on terminal illness have become a narrative genre in their own right and have attracted the attention of scholars, presenting a growing body of literature on self-presentation and legacy-making through illness blogs (for example, see Chiu and Hsieh 2012; De Boer and Slatman 2014; Keim-Malpass et al. 2015). We are interested in the ways the dying and their bereaved contribute to constructing and maintaining an identity in their blogs through which the dying can be remembered after their death. Even though Hans' words mark the end of both his blogging and his life, they might not be the end of him. Seeing we are here reading those words, we get to know Hans years after his death through the stories he has told about himself long ago. The construction of a (future) post-death identity is what psychologist Edwin Shneidman (1973, 45; 2008, 150) has termed the 'postself'. In addition to Shneidman's concept of the postself, which will be further outlined later in this article, we are drawing on the notion of self as a narratively constructed identity, underlining the commonly accepted perception of human beings as narrative beings (Ochs and Capps 1996). People constantly tell stories in order to explain their own experiences and themselves. Telling stories and experiencing an 'I', an own identity, are therefore inextricably linked (Ochs and Capps 1996, 20). In other words, "the self is being formed in what is told" (Frank 2013, 55). The term 'stories' must be broadly understood here. Personal stories can be expressed in various genres, varying from the more obvious memoirs and diaries – for which a blog lends itself well – to medical records or legal statements (Ochs and Capps 1996, 19–20). Blogs are sometimes compared to diaries as they can both serve as a medium for regularly writing,

publishing and sharing personal stories (blog posts) in a chronological, dated order (Heyd 2017, 155–156).

This article has a two-fold structure, consisting of a conceptual framework and a qualitative study. A conceptual framework is provided on the notion of the postself, in relation to (a) narratively constructing an identity in the digital world, and (b) the ritual practices of the bereaved as they take over the deceased's blog. Five personal weblogs (four written in Dutch and one written in both English and Dutch) were analysed, the results of which are discussed in light of the theoretical framework. In doing so, we aim to contribute to an improved understanding of the postself, particularly with illness blogs and more generally in the online world.

*A Dutch case study*

Initially, ten Dutch publicly accessible blogs were sampled. The blogs were located via Google. After a preliminary analysis, five blogs were selected for further research based on the scope of the blogs. All five blogs are personal blogs about the bloggers' (four female and one male) experiences with their illness and treatment. The selected blogs are written by Hans ('Hans' final fight'), Claar ('Update Claar'), Margriet ('Margriet's blog'), Lotti ('Hello Life!') and Jacqueline ("And all of a sudden you're ill").[2] All five bloggers died before the start of this study. Their blogs were initiated following their diagnosis and comprise the period from their diagnosis until the moment of death. Or, in the examples in which the bereaved continued the blog, several months to several years afterwards. The blogs were read entirely, after which we focused on three types of blog posts, namely (1) the bloggers' introduction texts or 'about me' pages, in which they introduce themselves and their reasons for starting a blog, (2) the 'last words', the last texts the bloggers wrote before their deaths and (3) the blog posts that were (in

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[2] This article uses the same names as used by the bloggers on their blogs. The blog titles and quoted texts originally written in Dutch have been translated by this article's authors. The original Dutch quotes are added as footnotes. Lotti's blog title and posts were written in both English and Dutch; in her case, the selected original texts are quoted verbatim. A dossier with the blog posts and blog links is maintained by the authors.

some cases) written and posted by the bereaved after the bloggers' deaths. A summary description of the blogs is included in Table 1, based on our analysis of the blog posts.

**Table 1.** A summary of the blogs based on the authors' analysis of the blog posts

| Blog | Gender | Age | Disease | Blog summary |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Hans | Male | About 55 | COPD | A personal blog, aimed at sharing stories about himself and his own life in the context of the disease process. Hans wrote and published a last blog post shortly before his death, saying goodbye to his readers and sharing some last thoughts on his illness and impending death. |
| 2. Claar | Female | 47 | Metastatic nasal cavity cancer | A personal blog, aimed at sharing stories about herself and her own life in the context of the disease process. The writing is described by Claar as therapeutic for herself and informative for family members. Posthumously, the blog evolved into a memorial page to which others can contribute. Additionally, two years after Claar's death, her partner started publishing new blog posts about life after Claar's passing. |
| 3. Margriet | Female | About 30 | Metastatic ovarian cancer | A personal blog, aimed at sharing stories about herself and her own life in the context of the disease process, as well as keeping others informed. Posthumously, the blog was continued by Margriet's husband with several blog posts spread over several months, written both to and about Margriet, as well as containing his personal stories. |
| 4. Lotti | Female | 41 | Cancer (unspecified by blogger) | A personal blog, aimed at sharing stories about herself and her own life in the context of the disease process, as well as creating a source of help and inspiration to others. After Lotti's passing, a blog post was published with a short introduction by the bereaved, containing her last words as written by Lotti prior to her death. |
| 5. Jacqueline | Female | 33 | Stomach cancer | A personal blog, written for its therapeutic effects as well as to keep family and friends informed. The blog was continued posthumously by Jacqueline's husband, with several blog posts spread over several years addressed to Jacqueline. |

## Narrating and blogging the postself

Personal illness blogs revolve around the authors' personal stories. Before we turn to discussing the possible implications of this for the postself, we need to know more about the narrating and blogging of (terminal) illness stories.

Falling ill can cause such a disruption in a person's sense of self that it might result in, as sociologist Arthur W. Frank puts it, becoming a "narrative wreckage" (2013, 53). When our old narratives are no longer sufficient, new stories need to be explored, created and told. Becoming ill thus requires narratives to be able to re-orientate on the 'I' (who am I now that I am ill?) and one's life (where do I stand in life now that I am ill?). And by doing so, to ensure 'narratively' a sense of continuity of the self (Bingley et al. 2006, 193). Frank refers to the term 'self-stories' of psychologist Roy Schafer: narratives in which we shape our 'self', our narrative identity. These narratives need to be told to validate our existence. Through the recipient who acknowledges us, and through the act of storytelling itself, "[to] reaffirm that he is still there, as an audience for himself" (Frank 2013, 55–56).

To be remembered after death is an important motivation for cancer patients to take up blogging (Chiu and Hsieh 2012, 1572, 1575). Through blogging, the telling of self-stories can take the form of legacy-making, that is to preserve memories as a confirmation that one will be remembered (Keim-Malpass et al. 2015, 209). Another legacy-building ritual is the gifting of physical objects that define oneself, and by doing so "constructing oneself in the family's memory through the transmission of those things" (Marcoux 2001, 216). What sets apart blogging as a promising medium for ensuring one's legacy is possibly the strong belief that weblogs, even after the authors have stopped posting, will endure over time (Dean 2010, 48). These online diaries, in other words, serve the construction of a postself.

Speaking of '*a* (post)self' is somewhat questionable. We contend that this needs to be understood as an evolving identity. In (re-)constructing the self through narratives, there is no definitive identity as long as the posting continues. An identity is gradually

formed, which is subject to continuous change due to the events and emotions we experience and in which we (re-)construct the self. "In this manner, selves evolve in the time frame of a single telling as well as in the course of the many tellings that eventually compose a life" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 22–23). In their qualitative study of five Dutch illness blogs, De Boer and Slatman (2014) analysed how women suffering from breast cancer make sense of their changed selves through narrating their stories on a personal blog. They defined four different identities – the Estranged Cancer Patient, the Transient, the Heroic Survivor and the Disfigured Woman/Girl – that these women alternately took on in a circular process of self-narrating and re-owning themselves. Even though these selves, to a certain degree, were connected to specific stages of illness, the different selves occurred in all stages of illness and even overlapped (De Boer and Slatman 2014, 19).

The stories that the bloggers share involve what sociologist Erving Goffman has called "impression management" in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959, Chapter 6). According to anthropologist Mary Cross, impression management is part and parcel of the behaviour of bloggers, "controlling how [they] appear to others" (2011, 124). This is perhaps similar to self-censoring behaviour in physical diaries, as people are often aware their diaries might be read by someone else one day. A certain measure of impression management is also involved in the construction of a posthumous identity. When imagining their post-death identity, people tend to show concern about their reputation, impact and influence after death (Shneidman 2008, 30). However, for our understanding of illness blogs in relation to the postself, it needs to be noted that identities that arise through writing illness blogs are not necessarily intended to be a (future) post-death identity, or in other words: a conscious answer to the question 'who do I wish to be or remain after I have died?'. Telling and sharing personal stories might not be the blog's only purpose. Narrating stories and as a result narrating an identity can be the means by which to accomplish the blog's purpose instead of being a final purpose in itself. For instance, three out of five sampled bloggers explicitly describe their blog's purpose as, among other things, keeping their

friends and family up to date of their illness and treatment. That being said, in the blogs analysed here, we did find clear examples of "the dying [supplying] survivors with information, requests, and desires regarding how they themselves want to be remembered" (Unruh 1983, 345). Before presenting this in more detail, let us first further outline the concept of postself.

Shneidman analysed suicide notes in which the authors indicate how they want to be remembered after death. Simultaneously, although unable to pursue it themselves, they are concerned with exerting influence on "the many details of continued living" (Shneidman and Faberow 1957, 8). To Shneidman, the construction of postself is a matter of the dying: one's own concern about one's reputation, legacy and image in the memory of survivors (Shneidman, Faberow and Litman 1970, 59). In illness blogs, we can see how this imaginative construction of one's own postmortem continuation translates into written narratives as representations of the postself. One of Lotti's aims for her blog was to inspire others. Logically, this influences the blog's content. Lotti wrote:

> (...) with a passion for writing, I would like to share my experiences in daily life and in my fight against cancer. I also hope that with this blog I can be an inspiration to people who are also *dealing* with serious illness or other *struggles* in life. *Life's what you make it. So do the things you love, follow your dreams, enjoy life to the fullest and make every day count!* [3] (Lotti)

Helping and inspiring others can be an example of how people would want to be remembered after death and 'live on' and to be a continuous part of the lives of the living. Lotti carried out her positivity throughout her blog, both in the layout (bright

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[3] "(...) met een enorme passie voor schrijven, wil ik graag delen wat ik zoal meemaak in het dagelijks leven en in mijn strijd tegen kanker. Ook hoop ik met deze blog een inspiratiebron te zijn voor anderen die net als ik *dealen* met een ernstige ziekte of andere *struggles* in het leven. *Life's what you make it! So do the things you love, follow your dreams, enjoy life to the fullest and make every day count!"* [The text in italics is written in English in the original Dutch blog post and is quoted verbatim.]

green and pink colours, little hearts and positive quotes in the page header and footer[4])
and the choice of her blog posts (with titles such as "*stop and smell the flowers*"[5] and
"*thankfulness*"[6]). She was able to extend this in writing, to what she calls, her final
words. In her final words, she shares her life lessons with those who remain behind:

> Final words.
> I don't want to suddenly disappear without any notice, so here is my
> final blog post to say goodbye and thank you for all your compassion
> and support.
> Finally, I want you to know how important it is to keep enjoying each
> other and life itself. We all know how quickly things can end.
> Always say goodbye to each other, you'll never know when it will be the
> last time.
> *Enjoy life to the fullest and make every day count!*[7] (Lotti)

In sharing these lessons in her final words, which her family posted after her death,
Lotti seemed to be conscious of what she left behind and the influence she wanted to
have on her blog readers after death. Her blog is actively used to spread positivity,
during as well as after her life. This shows what David Unruh, in his study of strategies
of identity preservation based on his interviews with dying and bereaved people, refers
to as "solidifying identities", which through accumulating and distributing artefacts form
activities of the dying to "interpret and apportion their identities to survivors" as
strategies of identity preservation (Unruh 1983, 342). Solidifying identities should be
understood as accentuating those parts of your own identity that you wish to be
remembered for. Writing a blog is an example of how this can be done and can be

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[4] "Life's a journey so you might as well enjoy the ride", "Do the things you love, follow your dreams and make every day count!" Both quotes are originally written in English and quoted verbatim.

[5] Quoted verbatim.

[6] "Dankbaarheid."

[7] "Laatste woorden. Ik wil er niet zomaar tussenuit knijpen. Vandaar deze laatste blog om afscheid van jullie te nemen en jullie te bedanken voor jullie medeleven en steun. Als laatste wil ik jullie meegeven hoe belangrijk het blijft om te genieten van elkaar en van het leven, want we weten allemaal hoe snel het zomaar ineens afgelopen kan zijn. Neem altijd afscheid van elkaar, je weet nooit wanneer het daadwerkelijk de laatste keer is. *Enjoy life to the fullest and make every day count!*" [The text in italics is written in English in the original Dutch blog post and is quoted verbatim.]

viewed as instructions the dying leave behind for the bereaved (Unruh 1983). Lotti actively interfered in, and left instructions for, the way she is remembered by writing her final words for her relatives to post on her blog after her death (cf. Glick et al. 1974). Her blog thus has become an "artefact of her personal history," an (online) object that represents her and something she imparts to the people she leaves behind, both to care for and to be remembered by (Unruh 1983, 343). Similarly, on the front page of her blog, Claar wrote:

> Dear visitors, thank you for your interest in my blog. Is this your first time on this blog? In that case I have to disappoint you, unfortunately you are too late to 'read me' while I was alive. However, I warmly invite you to get to know my adventures (...).[8] (Claar)

With these words, Claar welcomes new readers after her death, explicitly inviting them to read her self-stories. She addresses her readers in the present tense, almost as if she is right there at the other side of the screen, securing the posthumous continuation of her presence among the living. Furthermore, we see that Claar left clues about who she wanted to be remembered as:

> (...) you can safely assume that I enjoyed [my life] intensely until the very last second. Perhaps even more intense than many others (...).[9]

> Have fun and enjoy yourself to the fullest![10] (Claar)

These examples illustrate writing a blog as a possible means of trying to exert influence over one's posthumous identity. It fits in with the various modes Shneidman distinguishes through which the self can symbolically live on and transcend physical death, such as in the memories of others, in (creative) work we leave behind or through

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[8] Beste bezoekers, dank voor je interesse in mijn blog. Ben je voor het eerst op deze blog? Dan moet ik je helaas teleurstellen; je bent te laat om me in levende lijve te lezen. Dat neemt echter niet weg dat ik je van harte uitnodig om kennis te nemen van mijn avonturen (...)."

[9] (...) je kan gerust van me aannemen dat ik er tot de allerlaatste seconde intens van heb genoten. Misschien nog wel intenser dan velen (...)."

[10] "Leef je uit en geniet met volle teugen!"

organ donation or passing on genes (Shneidman 2008, 1973). Shneidman's elaboration of the notion of the postself (Shneidman 1995, 454–460) shows some resemblance to the modes of symbolic immortality proposed by psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (see Lifton and Olson 1974). In the present context, however, we find the postself a more apt term than symbolic immortality, because in this article we focus on the narrating of the (post)self in weblogs about terminal illness. The postself comes to the fore in the posted self, so to speak.

Scholars have expanded the concept of the postself to include not only how a person wants to be remembered, but also how the person is actually remembered by others. Sociologist Jack Kamerman, in particular, has argued that the postself is relational and has to be understood in a social context (Kamerman 2003; cf. Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2009; Wojtkowiak 2012). For fellow sociologist Michael Kearl, the postself, in a similar vein, is "to include all engagements between deceased individuals and the living, whether based on their intended legacies or the designs of others" (2010, 49). Unruh found that bereaved people carry out strategies by means of preserving both the identity of the deceased and an emotional attachment (Unruh 1983, 345). The next quote illustrates this. About deciding to continue her blog posthumously, Claar's partner writes that "this way Claar continues to send you updates."[11]

In a number of instances, the bereaved added comments to the analysed blogs in the period after the (initial) author had died to commemorate the latter. Elaborating on this, we will now discuss the internet as a ritual space and transcendent reality and how this relates to the concept of postself.

## Weblogs of the dead as ritual spaces

In the same way that people confronted with their own impending death look for ways to be remembered, after their death, the bereaved seek somehow to stay in touch with

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[11] "En zo blijft Claar je nog steeds nieuwe updates versturen."

the dead and look for ways to remember them. Before we discuss the contribution these practices make to the construction of postself, it is necessary we elaborate on the context and nature of those actions. The internet has acquired significance for an increasing number of people in facilitating the fulfilment of the desire to remember the dead. For instance, the Dutch website www.sterrenhemel.nl [in English starry sky] enables people to add digitally a star in memory of their deceased loved one, to an online night sky. The internet also increasingly provides us with options to document our lives in ways that remain visible and accessible for the living after our deaths. This can lead to social media networks and personal blogs – as an extension of the deceased's identity – transforming into a place for mourning and remembering (for example, see Walter et al. 2012; Brubaker et al. 2013; Ebert 2014; Bell et al. 2015). A blog's demarcated structure might be indicative of its function as a ritual space. Rituals – defined as anything done in such a way that it acquires special meaning to its performer (Bell 1997, 168) – require a demarcated framework that sets aside such actions from everyday actions (Christensen and Sandvik 2014, 61–62).

After physical death – which is often not perceived as being 'the end' of someone (Ariès 1981, 604; see also Kjærsgaard and Venbrux 2016, 17–19), as Margriet's husband illustrates by emphasizing his intentions to "continue [her] blog for at least a while [because] Margriet's story is not over yet"[12] – bereaved people may turn to continuing their bonds with the deceased (Klass et al. 1996) as a means to 'keep the dead alive' (Bell et al. 2015). Examples in our sampled blogs of rituals to continue relationships with the dead are the messages the bereaved send to the deceased through their blogs. In the years after her passing, Jacqueline's husband has written her letters on the anniversary of her death. The letters he writes are directed to Jacqueline herself and are composed of both memories of their time together and snippets of everyday family life, as though he is not only recalling memories but also keeping Jacqueline up to date. This can be understood as an effort to continue their bond (cf.

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[12] "Het is mijn bedoeling om dit blog in elk geval nog een tijdje voort te zetten – het verhaal van Margriet is nog niet voorbij."

Kasket 2017). Likewise, continuing Margriet's blog enables her husband to maintain their relationship. In the blog posts that he posted over the months following her death, he signs off with "the husband of". Building on Seligman and colleagues (2008) who define ritualisation as creating a reality as it could have been, signing off with the words 'the husband of' can be understood as creating a reality in which he remains Margriet's husband – not just her widower – and she is still his wife, despite her death.

These online practices have a few features in common with other continuing bond practices observed in the Netherlands. These practices include enclosing human ashes in objects (Heessels et al. 2012), setting up home memorials (Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2009) and roadside memorials (Klaassens et al. 2009) and keeping or wearing objects that belonged to a now deceased person or that represent the essence of that person (Visser and Parrott 2015). Ash objects (such as jewellery, tattoos or 'cuddle stones') evoke notions of, among other things, proximity and tangibility (Heessels et al. 2012, 472). Of course, ash objects are more than mere symbolic representations of the dead, since these objects actually contain the deceased's ashes, resulting in these objects being viewed by mourners as "part of the substance of [the deceased's] very being" (Heessels et al. 2012, 476). When handling ash objects, bereaved people may touch and talk to the objects and call them by the deceased's name in the same way as they would have treated the now-deceased person (Heessels et al. 2012, 476–477). Comparable to this, bereaved people tend to online communicate with the dead in much the same way as they did before. For example, after Hans' death, someone messages him:

> I just received the mourning card. I feel happy for you Hans, because your suffering has finally ended.[13] (Margo on Hans' blog)

Similarly, Margriet's husband buys her fresh flowers every week and tells her about this in a little note on her blog:

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[13] "Ik tref zojuist de rouwkaart op de deurmat. Ik ben blij voor je Hans dat aan jouw lijden een eind is gekomen."

> Dear Margriet, (...) this Friday, I'm getting you fresh flowers again. Orange ones this time, I think: autumn is coming.[14] (Margriet's husband on Margriet's blog)

It is through these actions that the living 'keep the dead alive', or as Christensen and Sandvik (2014, 60) put it: perform the dead into being. The ritual practice of writing to the dead through their blog lets the deceased symbolically transcend their absence. The wearing of a deceased person's keepsake and the keeping of home memorials and roadside memorials have the same effect for mourners, providing them with a sense of closeness to the deceased person (Klaassens et al. 2009, 194; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2009, 152; Heessels et al. 2012, 476; Visser and Parrott 2015, 29) and/or a place for ritual communication through which to maintain their bonds and keep the dead person's postself alive (Klaassens et al. 2009, 196; Wojtkowiak and Venbrux 2009, 151, 153). However, blogs should not be only perceived as ritual spaces where the dead are given immortality by the living. Memorials – including online memorials – can be experienced as fixed places where the dead are situated (Maddrell 2013, 509). However, what contributes to the idea of the internet as transcendent reality is that the online world is a specific ritual space in which it might seem like the dead are actually still present (Walter et al. 2012, 292). A response of the person you are sending a message to is not necessarily required or expected on social media pages, other than when talking to or calling someone. You can simply leave a message to the other person to get something off your mind. As sociologist Tony Walter and colleagues (2012, 293) put it:

> Posting a Facebook message to the dead and posting a Facebook message to cyberspace feel just the same. If once the dead were once in heaven 'up there', now they reside in cyberspace.

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[14] "Lieve Margriet, (...) vrijdag krijg je weer nieuwe bloemen. Oranje dit keer, denk ik: de herfst komt eraan."

On Claar's blog, this transcendent reality is also visible in the way her loved ones posted a blog post prior to her death, in which they indicate that Claar was barely consciously present. They subsequently addressed a message to Claar to let her know that they were with her. Even though they might have felt they could no longer communicate with her in real life, she seemed to be reachable through her blog:

> And there you are, dearest Claar (...) We are right here with you, while you nod off into your deepest sleep. We are incredibly proud of you![15] (Claar's blog)

The social immortality of the dead that arises through continuing bond practices can fluctuate and be less or more present in certain contexts. The letters Jacqueline's husband writes to her annually on the anniversary of her death are a case in point. Anniversaries might be days when the bereaved are more conscious of their deceased loved ones, which can temporarily raise their social immortality (Wojtkowiak 2012, 52). The social aspect of symbolic immortality means that immortality can be maintained only as long as there are people alive who keep the postself of the deceased alive. This does not necessarily mean that social immortality will only last for as long as people who have actually known the deceased are alive (cf. Wojtkowiak 2012, 36). An online postself in the form of a blog can – as long as it remains online – always be found, read and contributed to via search engines, even without intervention of people who have known the deceased. In other words, in sending messages to the dead, the bereaved maintain the dead's postselves. Furthermore, this could lead to the bereaved (re-)constructing the dead person's postself. The figure of speech by Christensen and Sandvik (2014, 60) of 'the living performing the dead into being' can help us provide insight in the surviving relatives' contribution to the postself construction as they continue the deceased's blogs: the bereaved play an active part not only in performing but also in (re-)writing the protagonists scripts. As Jacqueline's husband annually

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[15] "En daar lig je dan liefste Claar (...) Wij zijn bij je, terwijl jij begint aan je diepste slaap. We zijn zo ongelofelijk trots op je!"

catches up with her, he attributes certain characteristics to her in his writings –
remembering her, for example, as positive, strong or organised as shown in the quotes
below – and thereby contributes to the stories that make up her post-death identity.

> In your blog posts, you often made a toast to life. You asked me soon
> to do the same … enjoying myself, living … but I can't yet. A huge
> feeling of guilt comes over me when I fail to be happy, because then I
> think of you and the strength you radiated even in your last moments.
> (…) All normal things go as they should. The children go to school, the
> household is running (probably not as tidy as it would have under your
> reign) (…).[16] (Jacqueline's husband on Jacqueline's blog)

Thus, posthumously continuing a dead person's blog provides an example of a co-
created postself, as the bereaved continue to gradually (re-)form an identity for the
dead by continuing their story. Ochs and Capps, as discussed, speak of "the many
tellings that compose a life" (1996, 22–23). We could say that many tellings compose a
post-death existence as well. We speak of co-creating because the strategies carried out
by the living to preserve the identities of the dead could potentially transform their
postself, but this is not necessarily so. Linking up with a statement from Margriet's
husband on her blog – "Margriet's story is not over yet. But [with her passing] we will
finish a chapter"[17] – the next chapter the bereaved write might seamlessly fit in with the
rest of the book. Earlier, we have seen that Claar and Lotti present themselves as
positive and cheerful. Claar's blog has been turned into a memorial page after her
death, allowing others to post their memories of her. As Unruh (1983, 340) describes,
"the fact that survivors focus on personal identity implies that the deceased held certain
images of themselves while alive which others accepted". Thus unsurprisingly, the
memories others have of Claar show the same positive and cheerful woman:

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[16] "In je blogs proostte je vaak als afsluiting op het leven. Je vroeg me om dit ook snel te gaan doen … genieten, leven …
maar dat lukt me nog niet. Een enorm schuldgevoel vormt een bal in mijn maag als ik weer eens faal om dit geluk te
proeven, te pakken, want dan denk ik aan jou en de kracht die je zelfs in je laatste momenten nog uitstraalde. (…) Alle
reguliere dingen lopen zoals het hoort. De kids gaan naar school, het huishouden draait (waarschijnlijk iets minder proper
dan onder jouw bewind) (…)."

[17] "Het verhaal van Margriet is nog niet voorbij. Wel sluiten we straks een hoofdstuk af."

> (...) and Claar laughed the loudest. And since then I have witnessed that laugh every day with so much pleasure! Friday afternoon drinks (...) were always a party with Claar.[18] (Carolien on Claar's blog)

> (...) until the very end, she kept looking for ways to turn every day into a positive day. She was and remains a shining example of this.[19] (Marga on Claar's blog)

Despite fitting in with the postself Claar created for herself, after many contributions of the living, her own words disappear more and more into the background. Heidi Ebert (2014, 25) found the same in her study of a deceased's Facebook profile. She analysed the practices performed by the bereaved at the profile of a woman who committed suicide, and found that

> ... visitors continue to build and reshape the space. This reshaping, however, causes visitors to begin to replace the profile's creator as its subject. Because Betsy is now divorced from a space that supposedly represents her, the identity she built for herself there is covered by the material left by the living, her mourners, whose offerings eventually bury her (Ebert, 2014, 25).

In contrast, after publishing Lotti's last words, her bereaved closed the comments section on her blog. This enables them to control how Lotti is remembered through her blog, allowing Lotti's final words, and the message she wanted to spread, to speak for themselves.

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[18] "(...)en Claar [lachte] het hardst. En die lach, die heb ik sindsdien dagelijks met zo veel plezier gehoord! De borrel op vrijdagmiddag (...) was altijd een feest met Claar. (...)"

[19] "(...) ze tot het laatst bleef zoeken naar hoe je van iedere dag een positieve dag maakt. Ze was en blijft daarin een lichtend voorbeeld." (Marga on Claar's blog)

## Conclusion

In this article, we have looked at blogs of Dutch deceased people who were terminally ill at the time of writing and posting. We analysed the ways the dying and their bereaved use these blogs to construct and maintain a postself. Human beings, as we noted, can be considered storytelling creatures. We are *homo narrans*. Identities are narrated and reconstructed, both during life and after death, by the dying and the bereaved. The internet has become a significant environment to record, share and keep our personal stories 'alive'. Illness blogs in particular, as explored here, can take the form of legacy-making and provide an instrument and platform for the purpose of identity construction and preservation.

We have suggested that bloggers of an illness blog can consciously and actively interfere in the construction of their own postself: (1) by wanting to exert a certain influence through personal stories (to help, to inspire) and by setting up the blog accordingly, (2) by leaving behind 'final words' for the bereaved to post after death, and (3) by posthumously inviting new readers to become acquainted with the personal stories shared on the blog, and via this the 'self' that it comprises.

Additionally, we have argued that the internet, specifically an illness blog, can serve as a ritual space in which the bereaved perform continuing bonds practices. Furthermore, the internet can be perceived as a transcendent reality in which it might seem like the dead are actually still present. Related to this, bereaved people tend to communicate online with the dead in much the same way as they did before. Through the publishing of blog posts, writing comments to and about the dead and keeping the dead person's blog online, the postself is 'kept alive' after death by the bereaved. By doing so, the bereaved contribute to the stories that make up the deceased person's post-death identity, which could result in co-creating it. Thus, the online world can be a place where the dying and the dead seem to be present, and at the same time serve as a medium through which their presence is narrated into existence by the bereaved, subsequently both keeping the dead's postselves alive and possibly co-creating them.

## Acknowledgements

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