Natural Transitions

Conscious, holistic approaches to end of life

Volume 4 Issue 1

Green Burial 2015

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Jerrigrace Lyons, Founding Director of Final Passages, is a trailblazer in the new field of home funeral guidance. Since 1995 she has trained hundreds of students in a sacred approach to conscious dying, natural death care and family-centered funerals. Many of her graduates are now leaders in the home funeral movement. Jerrigrace is one of the founders of the National Home Funeral Alliance and now an emeritus board member. She is featured in the acclaimed PBS documentary "A Family Undertaking."

Final Passages is a non-profit educational 501c3 dedicated to compassionate choices in conscious dying, natural death care, family-directed home funerals and green burial. Our work has appeared in major newspapers, television and in film. www.finalpassages.org

Natural Transitions Magazine | Volume 4, Issue 1

DEPARTMENTS

On the Cover:
With the Earth *by Diana Zucco*
Acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"

Diana Zucco creates nature-focused art and explores art as ceremony. She is interested in the way art informs healing and transformation. Her website is www.deezucco.com.

FEATURES

EDITORIAL

How Green Is My Grave?

by Karen van Vuuren

Karen van Vuuren

I got my first glimpse of a natural burial ground in 2014, courtesy of Rupert Callender, then UK green funeral director of the year. Atop the most verdant of Devonshire hills, Rupert enthusiastically bid me survey the land he and his partner, Claire, managed for a local land trust. The site includes a simple wood shelter for ceremonies, a fire pit around which funeral-goers often reminisced, and a most glorious vista of sheep-dotted pastures and the River Dart.

Green burial seems to make sense to many people in the UK, hence the extraordinary number of natural cemeteries certified by the Association of Natural Burial Grounds, UK. Some of these are unadorned, unmanicured, a gift for Mother Nature to do with as she will. Others allow certain approved markers and monuments.

The US Green Burial Council certifies —among other types of natural cemeteries— what it calls "hybrid" burial grounds. This spring, I met the dynamic manager of a historic cemetery in Boston who has applied for hybrid certification. Meandering amidst the Victorian colossi of Mount Auburn, Candace Currie pointed out a few of the recent eight natural burials she has overseen. The sites are situated between existing graves in spaces deemed inaccessible for vault-lowering equipment. Notwithstanding the obvious financial benefit of selling otherwise unusable space, Candace appears genuinely committed to offering green options at Mount Auburn. The cemetery board also endorses sustainable landscaping practices and nature conservation.

The spectrum of natural burial is broad —from conservation burial to hybrids that offer green alongside conventional burial. Clearly, there's also a degree of greenwashing out there, and that's why certifying bodies applying standards can provide transparency and protection for the consumer.

In this issue of *NTM*, we spotlight what's happening with natural burial in the US, while including voices from the UK and Australia. We feature some of the pioneers in the movement—Billy Campbell of Memorial Ecosystems, Cynthia Beal of the Natural Burial Company, Joe Sehee of Green Burial Council International, and Rosie Inman-Cook of the Natural Death Centre's Association of Natural Burial Grounds, UK. Not all these movers and shakers see eye to eye, but we at *NTM* are grateful for the difference they are making to the landscape of death.

Natural Transitions

Published biannually by Natural Transitions
a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

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OUR VISION
- Acceptance of death, loss, and grief as a natural part of life

OUR MISSION
- To share holistic approaches to end of life
- To provide a forum for end-of-life caregivers and educators

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Natural Burial … It's Really Simple

by Billy and Kimberley Campbell, Ramsey Creek Preserve, SC

I have to admit feeling frustrated by the recent gone-viral story on Italian-designed burial pods. "Biodegradable Coffins Could One Day Replace Depressing Cemeteries with Lush Forests" screams one headline. Wow, what a concept. Create a forest through burial. The pods are beautiful, if completely impractical (difficult to excavate, too deep, difficult to lower, concentrated nutrients not so hot for trees without tap roots, etc.). But what frustrates me the most is not the design, but that such a large segment of the educated public still does not know that natural burial has been around for a couple of decades and in a way that restores/creates forests and prairies.

The media and public seem to be enchanted with often complicated, green burial products and technologies at the expense of simple, natural and conservation burial. I am thinking of projects to freeze-dry and shatter bodies, dissolve them in alkali, or compost them. The mushroom-suit lady's TED talk has had over 1.1 million views. The company plans to "develop a unique strain of mushroom that decomposes and remediates toxins in human tissue." I hate to be a naysayer, but natural, native fungi spores are all over the forest floor. At Ramsey Creek, we put sticks from the forest floor vertically into a grave to the level of the body in order to create micro-channels for nutrient transport and to impregnate the entire soil layer with mycorrhizae. I am pretty sure they will do the same job as a mushroom suit and cost nothing. About two years ago, a national magazine called me to ask about the latest green burial techniques and technologies. I told him about employing restoration ecology and conservation biology to create a new kind of nature preserve that is not a one-dimensional cemetery. He said he was looking for something more "cutting edge." By that, I think he meant "weird and lurid."

Those of us in the conservation burial end of things want to keep it simple: Instead of spending money on products and technology, we want most of the money to go towards protecting land and nature.

But perhaps these stories will at least help spread the message that we have choices beyond contemporary funerals and cremation.

Certainly, the number of natural burial sites in the US is increasing rapidly, although hybrid projects—a few acres off the back of an existing contemporary cemetery—are growing faster than conservation burial sites. This is because the marginal cost of adding a "green garden" is a small fraction of what it costs to create a freestanding nature preserve of significant acreage.

Another approach, minimal service at a cut-rate price, is also gaining ground. In Vermont, the legislature is considering a bill to allow families to bury non-family members on their property. This approach suffers from a lack of standards and an understanding that real conservation and restoration do not occur by chance and for free. The Vermont bill would not require an endowment, for example.

However, the interest in real conservation burial is higher than it has ever been, with a number of financially successful projects now up and running, and with many more coming online soon. The success of the Honey Creek Woodlands at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in metro Atlanta demonstrates that a well-placed conservation project (especially when done by a beloved institution) can do well.

Ultimately, projects where client families can participate in saving a special natural area and where visitors can engage in a variety of activities should be more successful than hybrid and "bare bones" offerings.

Natural Transitions has always focused on building community. With that goal in mind, our Community Forum page is to encourage communication among our subscribers and within this movement for more conscious, holistic, and greener approaches to end of life. We welcome comments on the articles and sharing news and inspiration from your part of the world! Email your letters to mag@naturaltransitions.org.

GREEN is the new BLACK

by Mary Reilly-McNellan

If you had to draw a picture depicting "green burial," what would it look like? During a recent community meeting to explore this topic, we were asked to create an artistic representation of what the ubiquitous term meant to us. Although initially a bit daunted by the exercise (my art skills are generally limited to stick figures and smiley faces), I decided to give it a whirl. The result was a disturbing, crudely drawn cartoon of a gas-mask-adorned skeleton glowering at a radioactive tombstone. The unfortunate skeleton bore an uncanny resemblance to a pig, and although I am no psychologist, it seems clear that the drawing was my amateurish attempt to capture the occasional pangs of fear that I experienced during my 17 years as a historic cemetery preservation manager.

Don't get me wrong—I love spending time in old burial grounds, and I am perfectly comfortable in them, day or night. Mending faded headstones, keeping the encroaching vegetation at bay, carefully probing the ground for fallen grave marker fragments, and educating the public about these "sacred grounds" has been immensely rewarding. But I continue to be haunted by an article that I stumbled upon in the late 1990s that describes how many old graveyards—particularly those dating from the Civil War to the early 1900s—have become toxic subsurface landfills. I realized then that digging in the dirt and resetting old stones was not the innocuous activity it seemed.

In his book *Grave Matters*, author Mark Harris describes how toxic embalming fluid eventually leaches into the environment, tainting surrounding soil and groundwater with formaldehyde, lead, and, in many older cemeteries, arsenic. A deadly poison, arsenic was frequently used in early embalming solutions in the pre- and post-Civil War years. Fifty years later, the federal government banned its use in the funeral industry because too many embalmers had died from years of exposure to this noxious chemical.

Even more disturbing is the enormous amount of resource consumption and environmental damage that results from traditional funerary practices in the United States. Each year we bury enough metal to build the Golden Gate Bridge, enough wood to build 1800 single-family homes, and enough carcinogenic embalming fluid to fill eight Olympic-sized swimming pools. Cremation, although less harmful to the environment, still uses significant amounts of fossil and other fuels that release more than 23 million pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and pollute the air with toxic mercury, furans, and dioxins. And this is not even addressing the turf grass maintenance in cemeteries that destroys native plants, introduces untold gallons of toxic herbicides, and sucks precious water resources—all to maintain a landscape deserving of the Victorian-era descriptor of "God's Green Acre."

It is a sad irony that our sacred rituals for dealing with death themselves cause additional mortality and harm to our environment. Thankfully, the US and international green burial movement is blossoming, encouraging a less toxic alternative to traditional funerary practices.

A basic tenet of green burial is to embrace the body's return to the earth in a true "dust to dust" manner, foregoing such conventional practices as embalming and encasing remains in cemetery vaults. Bodies are dressed in natural fibers such as cotton or wool, and caskets and urns consist of biodegradable materials or simple shrouds. Rather than the traditional depth of "six feet under," the deceased are laid to rest in three- to four-foot-deep holes, in natural settings or woodlands. This is a suitable depth for bacteria to begin the inexorable process of decomposition because microbial activity and soil life drops tremendously at depths greater than four feet. Within ten to fifteen years, remains are reduced to bones. Rather than placing a tombstone (some of which are shipped from far-away quarries, requiring tremendous energy and carbon emissions for manufacturing and transportation), grave locations are noted by Global Positioning Systems (GPS) or fieldstones found at the site.

Several notable green burial locations in the US have taken the practice one step further. Honey Creek Woodlands of Conyers, GA, and Foxfield Preserve in Ohio successfully model the concept of cemeteries as nature preserves that actively promote a strong land conservation ethic. These cemeteries reflect the belief that burials can be used as a tool to protect and restore the land. An added benefit is that natural burial costs are generally about half those of contemporary burial, which in the US, averages between $7000 and $10,000.

Perhaps most importantly, green burial often promotes the effective processing of death and healing for family and friends. Planning and participating in this final act demonstrates enormous love and reduces the impact on our environment. Death is moved back to where it belongs—in the hands and hearts of loved ones—and becomes a means of regeneration rather than degradation.

HONEY CREEK WOODLANDS

Honey Creek Woodlands (HCW) is a 98-acre natural burial ground owned and operated by the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, GA. Located 30 miles southeast of Atlanta, HCW's peaceful pine woods and rolling hills

Courtesy of Honey Creek Woodlands

Bluet flower, Houstonia caerulia at Honey Creek Woodlands.

provide a scenic—and nontoxic—final resting place. Initially established by Trappist monks, the burial ground is protected by a strong conservation easement and endowment created from a portion of plot sales. HCW currently holds 536 interments and is available to persons of any (or no) religious affiliation. This natural/conservation burial ground not only prohibits embalming and burial vaults, but also actively promotes a land conservation ethic by protecting a key part of the larger, 40,000-acre Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area. Congress has recognized the Arabia Mountain National Heritage Area (which includes HCW) for its unique contribution to our nation's natural and cultural history, delicate plant life, and green space.

Historically, the Honey Creek Woodlands site had been farmed for cotton and timbered for pine, and the land was in need of some active restoration to help regain its ecological health. By 2006, efforts were underway to identify remaining diversity elements to help protect and develop a healthy hardwood forest and eastern wildflower meadows. Today, the nearly 50/50 mix of meadow and pine forest ecosystems is home to such species as white-tail deer, wild turkey, great horned owls, butterflies, dogwood, wild rose, and woodland phlox. Only approved native vegetation may be planted on the site, and, because it may introduce invasive species, no outside mulch, straw, or bark may be brought onto the property.

With 4000 people visiting HCW annually, it is important to monitor the site for environmental impact. Joe Whittaker has managed HCW since 2008, when the business operated out of a simple, one-room cabin reminiscent of Thoreau's idyllic dwelling at Walden Pond. Since then, the operation has moved into a new, larger facility that includes additional restrooms and an expanded parking area. Golf carts now ferry visitors who are not able to navigate the area's trails and paths to grave sites. I asked Whittaker about some of the biggest issues he deals with as a manager of a green burial site, and dealing with the impacts from increased visitation was high on his list. "Working with the dead is easy," he laughed. "It is working with the living that can be difficult."

Education is critical to help protect HCW. Visitors are reminded that they are entering a natural wilderness area where herbicides are not permitted. Whittaker recalled a time when a visitor surreptitiously sneaked in a popular herbicide to kill the weeds growing in this natural wilderness area. "Some folks think that if a grave is not manicured, it is being disrespected," he noted. These "weeds" may well be native plants that are an integral part of the National Heritage Site.

Today, HCW averages three to four burials per week, half of which are cremains. Graves are hand-dug by staff members to protect the grounds from heavy equipment, and families sometimes assist in closing the grave by shoveling fill dirt over their loved ones'

remains. "We love to see family participate in caring for their own," says Whittaker. "It seems to help with the grieving and the healing."

Burial on the lower prairie at Foxfield Preserve with view of Sugarcreek Valley

FOXFIELD PRESERVE

Located roughly 600 miles north of Honey Creek Preserve, Foxfield's nature preserve cemetery rests quietly amid the rolling hills of Wilmot, OH. Established in 2008 as the nation's first green cemetery to be operated by a conservation organization, Foxfield Preserve's 43 acres offer a unique location for returning the body to the earth—just as generations have for thousands of years.

Foxfield is a small but significant part of the 3500 acres protected by The Wilderness Center, a land conservancy that works to connect the community with nature, educate people of all ages, protect natural resources, and practice land stewardship. Proceeds from each plot sale at the Preserve benefit The Wilderness Center, funding a multitude of free educational activities that reach over 11,000 school children each year.

The cemetery's green or natural burials also serve as an effective conservation tool to restore and protect natural areas. Ecological restoration of the site has provided habitat for a variety of indigenous wildlife, a cleaner watershed, and a reduction of the amount of natural resources consumed in the burial process. Foxfield Preserve's acreage also provides an additional buffer that helps protect the natural resources and biodiversity of the surrounding lands managed by The Wilderness Center.

Foxfield's burial ground requires very little maintenance because it is first and foremost a nature preserve. Nature trails provide easy access and hazardous trees are removed, but Foxfield otherwise bears little resemblance to a conventional cemetery. The burial grounds are maintained as forest and prairie, and naturalists are restoring the land to a more natural condition by planting native prairie meadows and reforesting hillsides. While traditional cemeteries tend to lose soil over time from interments, land steward, Sara Brink, is happy to report that Foxfield's prairie has actually gained an inch of topsoil from the proliferation of native tall grasses.

Foxfield's conservation biologists and naturalists work closely with the Green Burial Council to set industry standards across the country, and it is no surprise that the operation serves as a model for other "green burial" cemeteries.

Mary Reilly-McClellan has been a volunteer editorial assistant with NTM for the past two years. Her interest in environmental conservation has led to a new-found passion for promoting green burial, and she is currently working with a local team of volunteers to bring this sustainable tradition to Boulder..

Who Wants Green Burial & Why?

by Lee Webster

This year marks ten years of providing independent, verifiable standards for green burial and natural burial products and services first developed by the Green Burial Council in 2005.

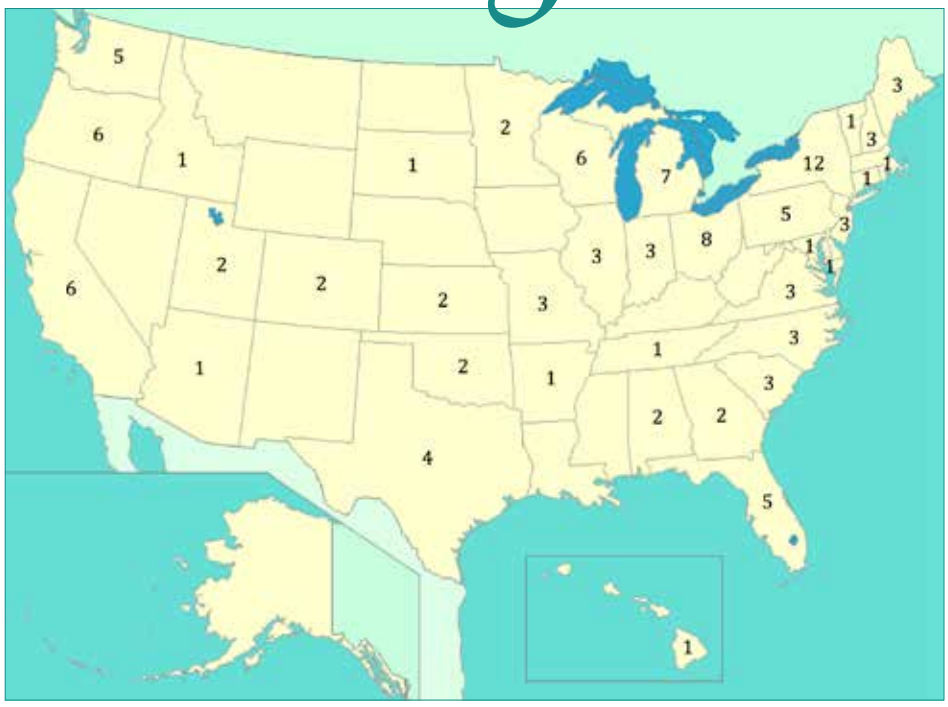
This year also marks a major change in the way the GBC does business with the addition of a second entity to go along with its certification efforts that is devoted entirely to educating the public about green burial.

The education board was formed to develop educational materials and initiatives that would support cemeterians, funeral firms, and other green goods providers as well as the public in an effort to support the formation of new green burial space and improve communication between the people in need and the people who serve.

Since the first green burial cemetery in the US, Ramsey Creek Preserve, was established by Billy and Kim Campbell in 1998 in South Carolina, there has been a rise in media and public interest, particularly in using burial as a means to protect natural areas and encourage environmental sustainability.

There are now at least 125 cemeteries in operation today in the US and Canada in the three categories that were originally established by the GBC: 73 hybrid (green space in an existing cemetery), 46 natural (space devoted entirely to green burial), and 6 conservation (protected land partnered by a land trust or other conservation entity that allows green burial).

The GBC currently certifies 43% of all existing US and Canadian green cemeteries, and we are looking for data to help determine how our offerings can best be developed to provide the most value to both cemeterians and the public.



Certification of green burial cemeteries as well as other funeral service and product purveyors is critical for a number of reasons, chief among them the annual assessment and enforcement of uniform standards that are based on scientifically determined best practices.

Being certified by the Green Burial Council is coveted because that seal of approval signifies to the public that the cemetery or funeral home meets a stringent set of criteria that ensures that the product being sold has a guaranteed environmental integrity. One specific concern that GBC certification addresses is false or deliberately misleading advertising—called greenwashing—by requiring full disclosure of pertinent environmental ingredients, processes, and products.

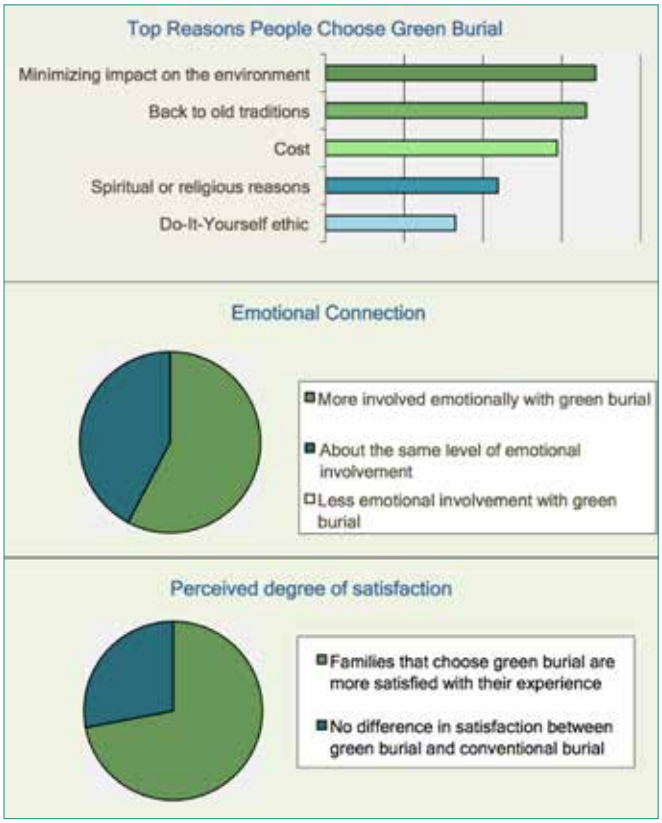
This level of scrutiny and the resulting award by level of compliance is worth its weight in gold since it comes from an independent nonprofit agency rather than a vested industry-related one. As is the case with most certifications, the GBC's oak leaves come at a price that many start-up cemeteries often balk at initially, but come to value as customers increasingly demand proof of product viability.

The Survey

As a first step in understanding where we are and how the culture is changing around environmentally sensitive burial practices, we asked 70 green burial cemeteries of all types to complete our online survey of 54 questions. We had a 54% response rate, of those, 43% are certified by the GBC.

Our first goal was to learn about the market and the people who are ultimately creating cultural and social change around death by seeking out green burial options and buying into them.

The first question we asked was: "Is the demand for green burial growing, staying the same, or declining?" From there, we asked why the cemeterians believed their green burial families



wanted it, who their typical customer was, and what additional benefits might be achieved to increase satisfaction with the process and experience.

In answer, 72.4% believed that the demand for green burial has increased, while 20.7% believed it has stayed the same since they opened.

The majority of consumers was ranked in the mid-upper range economically, with college degrees. Not surprisingly, most are from the Baby Boomer generation (born 1946–1964), along with their parents, the Mature/Silent generation (1927–1945) coming a close second.

Another confirmed suspicion that has been bandied about in national magazines for some time is that the largest consolidated number of green burial purchasers consider themselves spiritual but not religious or, in today's lingo, "the unchurched." But that tells only half the story. Those who were described as religious in varying degrees and across several faiths still made up the vast majority of consumers, and only a fraction didn't identify with any faith at all.

Of those who participated in the survey, 72% reported that families experienced an increase in satisfaction with the green burial experience, citing their participation in tangible ways, such as digging or filling the grave and physically moving their loved one through the cemetery to the grave, and so forth. The preferred method is still by people-power, by pallbearers or a carriage with family and friends taking turns pulling. When horse-drawn carts or motorized carriages were involved, the crowd surrounded as they walked their loved one home.

Additionally, 57.7% said that they believed families were more emotionally connected to each other and to the deceased by the green burial experience, with 42.3% at about the same level when compared to conventional burials.

When asked what options these families might have chosen were a green option not available, 44.8% probably would have opted for cremation, closely mirroring the 50% national average projected by the Cremation Association of North America between 2015 and 2018.

When changing the preference from cremation to green burial was paired with the financial affluence of the most common green burial consumer, it was clear that it is not about the money—it is about the meaning. In fact, when asked why they thought people were choosing green burial, cemeterians told us that minimizing impact on the environment by bringing back old traditions was what motivated them far more than cost or religious reasons. But the chance to be part of something bigger than themselves outweighed all other reasons.

Cemeteries That Serve the Living

The study revealed that, along with furthering environmental responsibility through natural burial that eschews toxic chemicals, use of exotic woods, and metals from China, there is yet another reason for choosing green burial. There has been a subtle but definite shift from the practice of warehousing concrete-encased dead in lawns to the more idyllic vision of once again making cemeteries places where families are nurtured while honoring the dead, where people can feel good about helping to create and sustain the natural environment and the community that connects and grows there.

Many green cemeteries, particularly natural and conservation cemeteries, promote walking and hiking on access trails, using quiet spaces for meditation, picnicking, and family gatherings. Others find that natural cemeteries lend themselves to singular and group activities such as birdwatching and educational nature programs for all ages.

Steelmantown Cemetery in New Jersey (http://steelmantowncemetery.com) is a prime example of a recovered cemetery that offers a rich outdoor education program for people of all ages, along with nature trails and opportunities to support the conservation work going on above ground. For a list of other natural and conservation cemeteries, go to http://greenburialcouncil.org.

The majority of cemeterians indicated that, rather than putting up conventional head- and footstones or large granite and marble monuments, their families preferred small, flat, and semi-permanent tributes, such as benches, trees and other living memorials. Most full-body burial families still want individual recognition of their loved ones, but they indicate strongly that they don't want permanent markers that would mar the landscape.

A small number—less than 14%—of cemeteries are using geographic information system (GIS) units to mark graves so that they know for certain where the bodies are buried. At present, however, the cost is fairly prohibitive.

What Separates Green Burial from Conventional Practice

While the impetus for starting the Green Burial Council was firmly in the environmental arena, it is clear from this snapshot of where we are now, given by those who know first-hand, that the need and desire for natural burial practices has much farther-reaching implications.

It's this emphasis on participation that survey respondents echoed again and again. By inviting and encouraging family, friends and community members to contribute by doing trail work, working as a docent, or helping spread the word about the cemetery, green burial presents an otherwise unheard-of opportunity to make meaning out of loss that goes beyond any specific funeral experience.

As the Green Burial Council looks to the future, these observations will inform efforts to reach the public about something they value deeply when their attention is brought, by necessity, to finding an eco-conscious, meaningful resting place.

Challenges

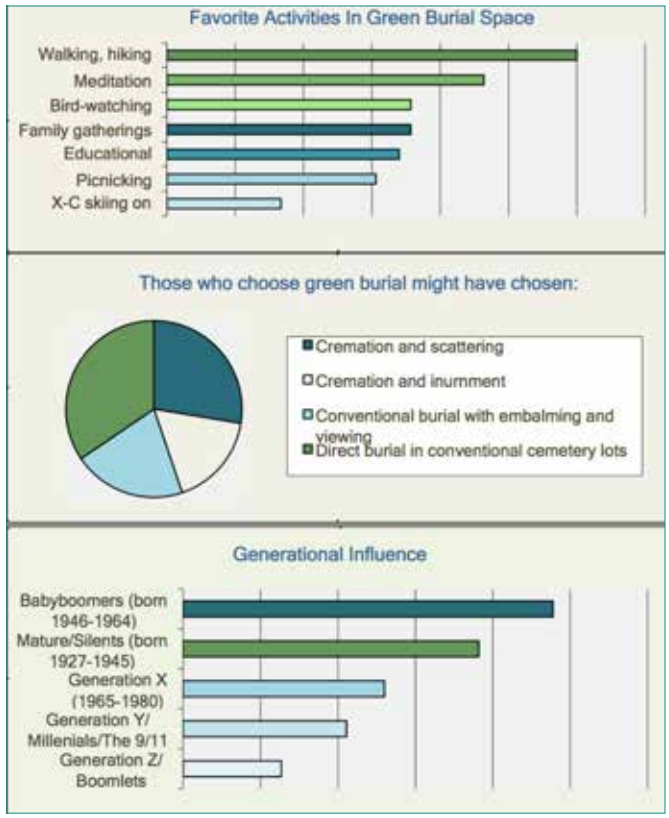
By and large, the cemetery operators surveyed agreed that the biggest obstacles to increasing the acceptance of green burial space are money and mindset.

The funeral industry in the US, including disposition businesses such as crematories and graveyards, makes about 20 billion dollars a year. That means that a fair number of people rely on providing goods and services that include items that are eschewed by green burial. By nature, the industry has a history of being slow to accept change, so creating new revenue centers will take time that many in this dying industry will not have.

Even though conventional burial, with vaults and body care that includes embalming, is relatively recent historically, the last of the generation that still remembers front parlor viewings at home are now dying, taking their memories and sense of normalcy around death practices with them.

Changing attitudes about burial and death practices in general will take time, as this topic goes beyond a logistical or practical realm. Choices around burial are cultural, spiritual, emotional, and social. Many feel that changing after-death practices is a social justice issue.

Surprisingly, millennials and others under the age of 40 are already on board with eco-sensitive alternatives, with a growing movement of death-embracers leading the way back to past practices, often with a twist.



Lee Webster writes from her home in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire. She is Board director of the Green Burial Council, Executive Director of New Hampshire Funeral Resources, and President of the National Home Funeral Alliance.

Graphics courtesy of Green Burial Council

Coeio

The Next Stage of the Infinity Burial Project

by Jae Rhim Lee

In 2009, I spoke about harmful funeral practices at TED* and introduced the Infinity Burial Suit. The suit speeds the decomposition of the human body and helps remediate many of the more than 200 toxins we accumulate throughout our lives. For me, the ideal burial would let us reunite naturally with the earth, lessen the harm to ourselves and to the planet, and provide a compassionate way to meet families' needs for healing, connection, and meaning; that is what I think of as "Infinity Burial."

Since then, three things have occupied my time. First, I've been designing improvements to the organic elements demonstrated at TED. That first prototype used mushroom mycelium as the primary agent. I've been working on enhancing the technology by incorporating specialized bacteria and enzymes that accelerate the decomposition and toxin remediation processes.

Secondly, I've been building a community across the globe advocating the need for such solutions as part of the Infinity Burial Project. We now have more than 1200 members worldwide.

Thirdly, I've been exploring how death and dying can become more human-centered, that is, how we can meet the needs of the dying persons and their families through the funeral process.

With this in mind, I've started a new venture called Coeio (pronounced "ko-e-o") that will bring the Infinity Burial Suit and other environmentally-friendly burial products to market. *Coeio* is a derivation of the Latin word, *coeo*, which means to "assemble" or "come together."

It sums up perfectly our goal of uniting families and reconnecting us with the earth.

We are in the midst of launching our first human prototype. Earlier this year, Dennis White contacted me about acquiring an Infinity Burial Suit. He'd been diagnosed with a terminal brain illness and was making funeral plans. We've been working with Dennis and his amazing family in Woburn, MA, visiting cemeteries, talking with death doulas, and joining him for Sunday family dinners.

We've been so moved by Dennis's story that we're working with award-winning director, Grace Lee to make a film about his process. We have just launched a Kickstarter to support it.

We're also establishing Coeio in New York, where we are working with designers and manufacturers to update the suit and produce it in a more cost-effective and sustainable way.

You can find out more about our project at www.coeio.com.

Photos courtesy of Infinity Burial Project

*TED is a non-profit devoted to "spreading ideas worth spreading." It stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design.

Natural Burial in the UK: 25 Years

by Rosie Inman-Cook

Natural, green, woodland, eco, meadow... it is all going on out here.

I have actually lost track of how many natural burial sites there are in the UK, but it's in excess of 300, although half of these are what we provocatively refer to as hybrids, conventional cemeteries with add-on "green corners."

I have mixed feelings about these hybrids. On the plus side, they provide a local and more easily accessible option for many. On the downside, most of them don't know what they are doing! It seems that well-meaning council members rightly appreciate that they should be offering this provision to their local residents. So they push through a change-of-use planning application or simply earmark a section of an existing, roomy cemetery. What they fail to appreciate is that the customers expect something different and the land has to be managed appropriately and with passion. Not, possibly, something the petrol-head, council groundsman can grasp. You certainly cannot expect the regular cemetery clerk to know one species of tree from another, let alone the management regime needed to encourage laval foodstuffs for endangered species of butterfly.

But, what we do have here is a thriving and beautiful private sector.

As well as managing the Natural Death Centre (NDC) in Yorkshire, I coordinate the Association of Natural Burial Grounds (ANBG). We are a close-knit gang, who strive to provide exceptional service and stunning, beneficial burial grounds. About 50% of the private sites around the UK are members. The other 50% fall into several categories, one of which is "not damn good enough to be members." We do expel sites, and this week I received a feedback form referring to one such site that a family had gone to assess. They reported it as "not fit to bury a dog in" and went elsewhere. Glad we got rid of them a few years ago then!

We run a feedback system that I think is completely unique and is not something that the Green Burial Council in the US operates. Every member of the association has to provide every family with a feedback form and envelope that is stamped and addressed to us here at the NDC. A simple check-box system allows families to rate the service they received and the quality of the site, its management, ambience, etc. There is also space for praise, criticism, and personal accounts.

Every day I open these forms and monitor the level of customer care. If there are any niggles, I get straight onto the site and ensure they are aware of any dissatisfaction or indeed of a bereaved person who seems to be struggling. In this way we not only help sites improve, but give them the heads-up on any customer needing extra support.

The hundreds of forms we receive every year are the database that we use to make an annual award for best in region and, ultimately, best in the UK: the People's Awards. The deciding factors come down to the quality of personal comments and letters sent as attachments to the forms, commending the attention to detail and the huge difference the managers have made to the bereaved—the love.

Movement

I am glad to see that things in the US are finally catching up. It is such a shame, though, that the majority of the rest of the world seems stifled by a combination of political and religious controls, causing a stranglehold on the funeral industry. I am constantly contacted by frustrated individuals in mainland Europe where the Catholic Church has a tight grip on all things funereal. The Dutch seem to be moving things forward; we have two international provisional members of the ANBG from there. But the French, Germans, and Spanish are really stuck. The Commonwealth countries seem to be doing better, Australia and Canada for example. I have even met fact-finding teams from Korea and Japan, but nothing seems to be moving forward for them yet.

In a small country like the UK, the pro-cremation lobby did a very good job of convincing the British public that if we continued to bury everyone as we did 150 years ago, the country would soon be covered in graveyards—costly, high maintenance, redundant graveyards. In the 20th century, "Leave the land for the living" was their very successful cry, resulting in over 70% of folks now choosing cremation. To be fair, they did not have the option of natural burial back then, and I have heard that, for the first time, the rise in the cremation figures has levelled out. Will it start to fall as the option of natural burial becomes more widely acknowledged and acceptable?

Talking of acceptable, it has taken us a good 20 years to turn around the image of natural burial. When I started out, the public thought of natural burial, in general, as simply burial for the tree-hugging, pagan, hippie types who all use cardboard coffins. That really held us back and damaged the growth of the movement. Therefore, if you are opening or managing a site, one piece of advice is to make sure that whoever does your PR looks reasonably normal and talks about normal things!

I have buried hundreds of people and can count on one hand the number of burials that would fall into the above pigeon holes. To normalize the option is extremely important. So the floaty-dress, smudge stick-waving brigade should

Higherground Meadow

back off if it wants to see the movement grow and benefit an increasing number of families. As an old hippie, I feel I can say this. I would also caution against holding any "alternative" type activities on the site, such as rebirthing weekends or any other such New Age waffle. Holding a tour of the site at 4am with a guide to study and listen to the dawn chorus is quite another thing. Wildlife? Good. Alternative dogma? Bad.

Corporate Creep

As with any successful movement, the money boys want a slice. Not only are we seeing venture capital-backed corporates opening up slick, beautifully presented, woodland sites adorned with ceremonial buildings. But cash rich funeral directors are also grabbing a bit of the action. Needless to say, their ethics are skewed from the original ideals of the movement, and they generally haven't a clue. Their sites are overpriced, and they are essentially creating burial grounds for the rich or the financially irresponsible. I also hate the pricing options they offer, which, for me, smack of Victorian snobbery when paying more got you a grave by the path where it would be seen. Now, for example, a site may be charging about $1000 for a plot by the car park and $5000 for one with a view. In my humble opinion, this is very wrong; we are all equal in death. And adding yet another pressure on the bereaved to "do the right thing" by spending more money to demonstrate respect for the deceased is unnecessary nonsense.

Funeral Poverty

Irresponsibility leads me to the real buzz phrase of the year—funeral poverty, a situation where cash-poor families, misguided by careless undertakers or swept along with the foolishness and pressure to "do the right thing," get themselves into debt. Often, no one suggests there are better value alternatives that might suit their situation, for example, do-it-yourself or direct funerals. The industry still hushes up these options.

UK-wide Direct Burial

This year, one of our ANBG members started this innovation: He created a network of carriage-masters, funeral directors, and natural burial grounds across the UK where direct burials can take place.

To be clear, a direct funeral is a funeral with no funeral. The deceased is simply collected and either cremated or buried with no ceremony. This could be following the deceased's instruction—because there are no people to mourn or because family members have said their goodbyes and wish to hold a memorial service another day, possibly at the time a tree is planted.

In the last year, direct cremation has really taken off, and once the public learns of the option to be buried like this, I know it will be the answer many are looking for. Both forms of direct funeral save in the region of $3000.

I am optimistic about the steady growth of the natural burial movement, the

A chocolate lover amongst the ferns and meadow flowers

true movement for the right reasons. Our biggest news is that we (the NDC) are opening our own natural burial site this summer within striking distance of London. Burial grounds management is what I know best, and, after eight years behind the NDC desk, I am looking forward to getting back in the field and training the new staff. We decided to go down this route for a couple of reasons. Firstly, to provide a flagship site of best practice where we can offer free training to would-be operators from anywhere in the world. Secondly, if we manage to create excess funds, we will be able to engage more staff, furthering our mission of education: helping the public to make informed choices regarding all aspects of death and dying.

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Photos courtesy of Respect Green Burial Parks and Natural Death Centre, UK

Diggin' In

Natural Burial from the Ground Up

by Cynthia Beal

The first five years: starting from scratch

It was early spring 2004. Inspiration struck, and the idea to create biodegradable caskets (I didn't know about "coffins" then) looked like meaningful work, appealing to the natural products clientele I'd served in Eugene, OR, for years. It was time for change. In my mid-forties, with my natural food store sold to a brother, my inner-entrepreneur was eager to advance new ideas through good business, just as our work with natural foods and sustainable agriculture in the '80s and '90s had done. Breaking ground in a new market is exciting, and a biodegradable casket company seemed perfect for the job.

Two weeks after I registered the Natural Burial Company, however, I took a break to manage a rapidly growing tumor—and face the possibility I'd be my first (and last) casket customer. Several months later, post-surgery, I'd gained a first-hand education in the difficulties faced by those like me who've decided we want a natural burial, without embalming, and the freedom to turn to compost when we die.

Like so many I'd hear from later, funeral directors were no help; *all* of my well-intentioned friends were misinformed (and thus misinformed me); even those who grasped the concepts had no idea how to carry them out. Pre-arranging what I wanted was, therefore, impossible. The closest I came by surgery day was to state my wishes in writing—*no embalming; no vault; earth-contact burial; cherry tree on top, cut down and harvested in its prime and made into musical instruments and bowls; grave re-used*—and trust friends and family to see to them if required.

Fortunately, it wasn't. But as I returned to my coffin company plans with renewed energy, I realized that others—maybe lots of others—wanted what I wanted, just like they had when I worked to get natural products into their bodies and homes. If I could help them get their "last stuff"—caskets, shrouds, urns and such—we'd all win.

My natural products experience said the market was early, but the signs were there: People wanted something they weren't getting; the industry didn't believe it (yet); it was a strange product—used only once—and complicated by taboo, myth, and the avarice of those who profit from ignorance and those who just don't know better. With no one in the US I could go to for information I didn't already have, I knew I was starting from scratch. I just didn't know how "scratch" that was!

Breaking new ground: From caskets to coffins to college

Fast-forward five years. During that time I designed natural funeral products to solve issues I encountered. I learned a *casket* has four sides and was an American marketing invention, and odd-shaped vessels are properly called *coffins*. I'd discovered the Ecopod in the UK, a hand-sculpted recycled newspaper coffin I determined to bring to the US; I'd attached myself to Ken West, founder of natural burial in the UK; I'd brought the first container of woven coffins and urns into the US—and I'd opened (and then closed) a biodegradable coffin and artist-urn gallery in Portland. I'd exhibited at industry trade association shows; spent countless hours encouraging funeral directors, home funeral enthusiasts, and cemeterians to add "natural burial" to their vocabulary. I'd written hundreds of thousands of words in articles and as responses to questions from consumers, producers, and would-be business people who wanted to start natural cemeteries—and yet something was off.

Although inquiries were high, biodegradable coffin *sales* (needed to expose people to alternatives, just as organic carrots had to show up at potlucks before people knew they could get them) were unexplainably slow. Funeral directors claimed there was no place to bury naturally, and the people I was hearing from—even those selling the new options—seemed confused as ever. Natural burial was easy. Why was this simple act so hard to understand? Had I missed something along the way? My UK colleagues and I were puzzled. What could be going on?

Myth-information: Gum in the works

Word *was* getting around. My new colleagues spoke and wrote as though they understood natural burial, but I was still reading—and correcting—a lot of misinformation. Lacking the time and education to think it through, reporters and university students inadvertently created new myths in widely circulated articles, papers and projects with questionable "facts": formaldehyde from embalming pollutes the soil,[1] hardwood caskets are bad,[2] green burial sections have significant environmental benefit,[3] all cemeteries contaminate the ground,[4] a tree grows from cremated remains,[5] natural burial grounds must be unmowed and graves unmarked[6]—all statements that are either wrong or need research.

Alternative service providers got organized, and "home funeral guides" gathered around common values, promoting practices that included natural burial. On the surface, the industry itself appeared prepared to embrace alternatives, with the National Association of Funeral Directors (NFDA) developing a green funeral director certificate program. But based on the questions and statements I was reading,

Natural Burial Company's first coffin gallery, Portland, Oregon, 2008

the US industry—the funeral directors and cemeterians who provide funeral services to the public—weren't getting it, at least not as they had in the UK, where natural burial surged after Ken West opened the first natural ground there in 1993.

"Mythinformation" spread. I continued to hear from people who couldn't find what they wanted; the funeral director told them natural burial is impossible without a "certified" cemetery; or a "certified" natural casket was required; or the rules required a vault, but a concrete grave liner turned upside down in the grave would let the body decompose—all unproven or untrue, and frustrating. Even cemetery sextons stayed stumped—until I'd talk through the process, so they could see that, yes, they could dig a hole, bury a body, and refill the grave with dirt a couple of times until settling was completed—only to learn that a concerned board member objected and the natural door was closed.

Had the green advocates missed the mark? On our side of The Pond, the Green Burial Council (GBC), a private US trade association, marketed green burial to the public on its members' behalf, but the members were (and remain) primarily funeral *directors*, whereas, the UK's successful natural burial movement is dominated by *cemetery operators*. Funeral directors don't *bury*; cemetery operators do. The GBC's initial funders, primarily from the mainstream funeral industry, may have had something to do with some early misdirection, but that doesn't explain the stagnant—and still miniscule—cemetery presence five (and now ten+) years later.

Another possibility was the FTC's legal proscriptions on using the word *green* or employing certifiers in product marketing. While small firms often ignored FTC regulations with impunity, larger firms that got entangled in the green labeling underbrush were vulnerable to expensive lawsuits. As long as the word *green*—an official environmental claim per the FTC, requiring quantifiable (i.e., science-backed evidence) for any assertion—remained the term of choice, uptake by the mainstream would be hampered. It seemed like a plausible theory, but I didn't have enough information to say for sure.

I remained stumped. Why was there so much inaccuracy circulating around and between many well-intentioned people? And what could I—a single unfunded alternatives advocate with ideas and observations that ran counter to both conventional practice AND the green marketing out to replace it—do in the face of such intractable momentum? With my amateur scientist hat on, the inaccuracies creating confusion suggested bad information was the culprit. And where does one go to correct bad information? To school, of course.

The second five years: School time

In 2009 I was invited by James Cassidy of Oregon State University (OSU) to present on natural burial for the Oregon Society of Soil Scientists. That presentation led to contact with the College of Agriculture at OSU, a land-grant university chartered to serve the general public and Oregon's businesses. I made a case for the University's involvement in cemetery management education to Sonny Ramaswamy, then dean of the college, pointing out that a cemetery is an agricultural, land-based enterprise, much like a farm, a forest or a large park. Research and education is conducted for farm and forest businesses; why not cemeteries?

Like a number of other universities, OSU is an emerging leader in sustainability research. "We need good research," I said. The pollution and community disruption potential of cemeteries is a black-box to American policymakers and researchers. Good cemetery research is scant and spotty, and problems seem likely once researchers decide to take a serious look. Given cemeteries' permanent nature, their fiscal, environmental and social sustainability are just as important as they are for other agricultural enterprises. In this light, the public benefit of a well-prepared cemetery management workforce and evidence-based research into the impacts of cemetery practices that separate fact from fiction are undeniable.

The university agreed the topic needed exploration, and we were on our way. Spring term 2012 we ran "Issues in Sustainable Cemetery Management," and OSU's soil science students engaged in cemetery service learning activities. By fall 2013, the first online course—"Introduction to Sustainable Cemetery Management," a broad cemetery overview designed for professionals, cemetery volunteers, and university students—opened.

Under Dr. Jay Noller and myself, the Sustainable Cemetery Studies Lab began to explore and describe the

Cynthia Beal, Grave Goods Gallery

university's potential role in identifying and addressing cemetery-related issues. Water and resource management, turf transition, pollution mitigation, habitat creation, soil health, cultural preservation, and eco-system service support all vie for attention. All are topics OSU excels in already, and all are clearly on the table for the thousands of US cemeteries in need of better resources.

It seemed like a good match. With a land-grant university on board, knowledge would flow, or so I thought. What I learned during this five-year stint is that universities are under severe budget pressure; they need a lot of grant funding to do research, and that funding comes primarily from an industry that understands its issues and wants to solve them. (Uh-oh.)

The third five years: Any cemetery can

Unanswered questions that need to be answered are hard for a university to ignore. By the end of 2014, it was clear the seeds planted at OSU would sprout, and OSU's inclusion of cemetery issues in their future outreach to the professional landscaping community and cemetery-related industries seems assured.

It's a new catechism, making sense to many here, and perhaps best captured in the motto "Any Cemetery Can." Cemeteries are permanent habitat; cemeteries have specialized turfs; cemeteries distort water-flows through and across landscapes; cemeteries have unique permeability rates and carbon-sink potentials and should be taxed differently; a community can have too many cemeteries for its mortality rate, dooming all to stress and failure if their number is not controlled; cemeteries deserve seed and labor grant assistance for maintaining public eco-system services—the list is long, and there's a lot to learn.

But university work is, by nature, slow. Research takes time and I'll be dead before the knowns succumb to deep-looking. So what's an impatient activist to do? If you're me, after you've prodded the industry and education nests, you go out and buy two existing cemeteries, sharpen your pencils and shovels, invite researchers to participate, and dig in!

Natural burial—*putting human remains directly into the earth so they can readily decompose*—is a simple change in practice that opens the door for new products and techniques. It's the gateway drug for cemetery sustainability, begging a host of questions about landscape, water and soil health management. It deepens and enriches our experience with life, as well as death. It resonates with what a better future is calling for. As such, the option itself becomes a call to action that's difficult to ignore.

I've always believed in the creation of working models—often in the form of businesses, my preferred mode of expression—to answer questions and test theories about how things work. For the Natural Burial Company and the SCS Lab, the next step on this journey seemed obvious. It was time to get practical and build a model—and that meant running a cemetery.

Transition time: The impatient activist

It was tempting to start my own natural burial ground from scratch. I almost did, but after several years of working with *existing* cemeteries and looking through new university and public-policy eyes, I realized it's the current cemetery operators who need the models and the answers that can come from them, more so than new start-up projects that may or may not even be necessary.

I also wanted a challenge. Anyone could go out and take over the management of a tract of land, get cemetery zoning, make rules, dig holes, bury bodies, and collect money for doing so—witness the American cemetery industry for the last 50 years! And if you did it in a natural area and promoted the conservation angle, or even next door to an existing cemetery that wasn't able to compete, so much the better—people want it. The marketing is easy, the starting-up fun, and the failure rate for most natural burial start-ups is probably far into the future.

But these places make lousy *cemetery* labs for solving current problems. They don't have legacy turf, vault, habitat, monument, policy, or water-management issues (common to all existing cemeteries) begging for solutions. And, in some ways, standalone natural burial grounds may even be the opposite of the very "greenness" they strive to attain, adding human impact to minimally-impacted land; increasing carbon and taxpayer footprints if travel, subsidized administrative/sales labor, or new infrastructure is involved; and taking one more natural burial that might have been done at an *existing* cemetery, where it would clearly *replace* the use of a concrete vault or non-degradable casket, fund the

cemetery's transition to sustainability, and measurably multiply environmental gains.

The Natural Burial Company: A cemetery natural

Grave Goods Gallery, Eugene, Oregon

Finally, I realized that my main tool for opening the dialog to these new ways—the biodegradable coffins, urns and shrouds I design, make, and/or sell for others—finds its natural home in the cemetery. Burying biodegradable things is great for the cemetery. They help build the soil web, they bring funding and inspiration to an often struggling enterprise, and their handmade beauty connects those who use, view, and decorate them, as well as those who lie in them, to an end-of-life process that's more resonant for current generations when they're natural.

No, the place for me was in an existing cemetery, in order to prove my conviction that "any cemetery can." The place to find the answers is in the middle of the problem, not on its periphery. An existing cemetery WITH issues was required. And I found two of them: two 150+ year-old cemeteries in the same county where my family has fed our customers organic food for 25 years. (Now we'll be able to plant and compost them, too!)

The Natural Burial Company has its coffins, shrouds, and urns on display in the cemetery office, making these new options visible to patrons. We also supply a natural funeral planning document and encourage people to fill it out. We honor what our customers want without making them feel awkward or bad about existing or past choices; but we also make it easy (and cheaper) to go natural and use less stuff. And we offer natural burials in any section of the cemetery, so that families can stay together, the naturally buried beside the less-so, but still together—a mixed bag for sure, but that's what family's all about—and it's great for the ground, too!

The Living Cemetery Project is finding its feet here, with the *Living Cemetery Handbook* emerging as we implement and document new policies and practices. I'm teaching our staff about natural burial, and they're now enthusiastic believers, too. One of my students has just joined the grounds crew and is now our official soil-maker. (Every cemetery should have one!) We're opening new sections, changing how we water and mow, with an eye on habitat building and fundamental soil health. It's great work, and the right choice for my next lap around the track.

If it's the last thing you do...

In retrospect, this may have been inevitable from the start, with my biodegradable coffin endeavor a prologue to something too big to think about otherwise. From the earliest days I could sense the scope of what I was tapping into. Abstractions aside, and focused on the practical where I thrive, this was never just about a product—although biodegradable coffins and urns are the tangible doors that trigger the mainstream imagination necessary for large-scale changes. And it wasn't about business—though business is the vehicle required to fund most change—and I was convinced the smartest firms in

the current industry would be on the bandwagon in the next few years.

What it became about for me, and what taking charge of transitioning and stewarding *existing* cemeteries rather than creating new ones has driven home is how little we really understand about our relationship to land, and how improving our interface *with* and use *of* it by putting our bodies and our memories *into it*, embedded in the nature that creates us, is core to that understanding.

Impending ecological crises demand that we get present with our environment asap. It means understanding our place in nature, and nothing says "sense of place" like becoming the place itself, putting your elements back into the soil-fund bank you withdrew them from.

Nothing says "social responsibility" like making that place an existing place, already used for the purpose, and needing your participation to thrive. Nothing says "community" like an old cemetery that will be loved as it ages, never to be abandoned, revered for its someday-ancient things, nestled in the midst of its people—creative, thriving, recognizing that its job is to sustain the unique notes of humanity still echoing there. And nothing says "sustainable" like the institutionalization of concepts and ideas that improve our lives and health and must be grasped and promoted by the mainstream in order to succeed.

Soil is *the* "mainstream" of Planet Earth. I'm walking soil; I'm headed back to it someday, and some of my friends are going with me.

Endnotes

1. Formaldehyde breaks down in the soil; it is not a proven pollutant but it *may* have negative impact on the soilweb.

2. *Rainforest* hardwoods from unsustainably managed forests have some environmental culpability; native hardwoods locally sourced have much less.

3. A cemetery that makes natural burial available *anywhere* on its grounds is clearly mitigating impact, as each natural burial is *also* one less vault and conventional casket used in a predesignated grave; a small token section might even increase impacts, depending on the circumstances.

4. The scientific evidence to date suggests that, while poorly sited cemeteries have a high contamination potential, the majority of cemeteries probably do not; however, the science has not been done, and conclusive statements can't be made until it is.

5. Super-heated calcium-phosphate (cremated remains) is biologically unavailable to plant roots without solubilizers; planting a tree in cremated remains would be like trying to grow it in pot of chalk or sand.

6. How land is cared for above the burial has nothing to do with the burial itself; a natural *burial* can be had in a chemically managed lawn-cemetery.

Photos courtesy of
Natural Burial Company
www.naturalburialcompany.com

Shifting Paradigms:

From the Individual to the Human Collective in Contemplating Green Burial

by Lee Webster

From time to time I am invited to speak to university and college classes. I find them both challenging—it's no mean feat these days to compete for attention with their devices—and sometimes extraordinarily refreshing. A recent class at the University of New Hampshire brought this home in style.

After I had finished my song and dance about the environmental hazards of conventional burial vs. green burial, a student asked a question I can't recall that led us to this one: "Why do we as Americans believe we are all entitled to a piece of the earth forever, even after we are gone from it?"

Yes, we put tons of concrete and exotic woods and toxic chemicals and metals and all manner of awful things in the ground. But why, really?

We say it's because we want to protect the dead from the unpleasantness of unmanaged decomposition, as if being buried in a box within a box will protect anyone or anything for eternity. We say it's because we want to protect the living from the dead, as if decomposing bodies must be hermetically sealed underground in order to control rampant diseases the body was not infected with and can no longer host.

These reasons have worked on an uninformed public for decades, but these days, fewer people are buying this blatant attempt at fearmongering. The Center for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, and the Center for Infectious Diseases have all stated in various ways that a typical human body does not pose an increased health risk as a result of being dead.

So what makes us continue to support the practice of warehousing our dead in rows on perfectly manicured lawns kept serene by heavy use of pesticides and herbicides? Why do we keep erecting massive shrines in the form of marble monuments and granite markers?

And what about this: At what point did our ancestors stop memorializing only the cream of the crop—war heroes, writers, scientists, holy men, and others whose contributions in service to mankind earned them an exalted place in our cultural and historical memory?

We will not get where we need to go unless we reframe our thinking about the individual and develop a global environmental understanding that puts into perspective our place in the scheme of things.

When did we as a society determine that every Tom, Dick, and Harriet deserved permanent recognition and presence simply for having resided on Planet Earth? While I might be interested in visiting Rob Roy on my next walk through Scotland, I doubt many people will be trekking far to see my great grandfather Rob's gravestone set amidst thousands in Hope Cemetery.

Other societies around the world handle disposition of bodies very differently, and not only in method. For instance, rental space is popular in some European countries, encouraging a limited period of grave-squatting before the bones are dug up and added to a communal ossuary and the space resold for the next deserving occupant.

What is it—other than having to give up the highly lucrative practice of cement vaults and elaborate mahogany and steel and bronze caskets—that keeps us from doing what we know is necessary to save the environment from cordoned-off real estate devoted exclusively to the dead? What will it take for us to stop focusing on the "rights" of the dead and instead begin planning for the needs of the living to come?

It's such a fundamental American concept—this belief that even in death we are different from everyone else who walks the planet, that we are individuals who deserve to be treated as such, each and every one of us, making none of us special, and all of us complicit in leaving a permanent, unproductive, scarring legacy.

The greatest obstacle to solving what has become a country-wide burial space crisis is our adherence to this belief in the rights of individuals to continue to take up space long after they have already gone.

Initiatives such as green burial, where space can be used and reused in perpetuity— encouraging human activity above ground; sustaining community, family, and the land—does not preclude the recognition of us as individuals worthy of honoring. Human composting, from which the resulting nutrients have the real potential to nourish the planet, has enormous potential for solving space and waste problems. But we get hung up on the distasteful concept of being just another organic being who will decompose into nothing under favorable circumstances.

We will not get where we need to go unless we reframe our thinking about the individual and develop a global environmental understanding that puts into perspective our place in the scheme of things. While this may seem threatening to many, it takes only a moment to realize any number of ways that a life may be fully commemorated with great honor and respect without taking up real estate with permanent structures.

Here's the refreshing part: My students got that part instantly.

Lee Webster writes from her home in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire. She is Board director of the Green Burial Council, Executive Director of New Hampshire Funeral Resources, and President of the National Home Funeral Alliance.

Reinventing the funeral home

INVENTING *THE* DEATH *STORE*

Bodhi Be in a counseling session with clients

Yes, The Death Store. Not the Transition Store, Passed Away Store, Near Death Store or Till We Meet Again Store. Words like "die" and "dead" have almost become taboo in our culture. It's often we hear that the tree died, the dog died, even the car died, but usually grandma "passes away."

To help heal our disconnection from all that does die, which is our disconnection from nature and all of creation, comes The Death Store, a store for the living and the dying. The hardware store, the shoe store, the Body Shop, and now The Death Store taking its proper place in the community commons, providing services and goods for the dying, their families, the grieving, caregivers to the dying, and all "who may die one day."

As an ordained interfaith minister in a Sufi lineage for many years, I am approached by people who were dying or caring for someone dying. Not having much experience in these fields, I signed up for a hospice volunteer training, after which I sat at the bedsides of people actively dying. It became my internship: seeing how people were dying as well as how people were refusing to die.

As a former entrepreneur and small business owner, I started looking into the funeral, cemetery, and casket making industries. I researched the trends in hospice growth, hospital strategies for dealing with dying and dead patients, and cultural and religious attitudes towards death and dying. So many cultures around the world, presently and for as long as there have been people, have included dying and death in village life. Why had we given it away to industries and institutions, thus removing it from village life, and what are the consequences of our doing so? Clearly we have robbed ourselves of essential and powerful community-building work and distanced ourselves from the importance of grieving and the importance of living with death as a companion. Death has become a medical and psychological event, best left in the hands of experts, as well as an expensive event.

The most known thing, that we will die, is the least known about. We no longer know how to die as we're rarely around a dying person where we might learn. And given our cultural attitudes of aversion, denial and avoidance, sitting at the bedside of the dying rarely provides an opportunity to learn how to engage in dying wholeheartedly, face forwards.

The certainty of our dying and death—and the death of everyone we know—is central to our life. How we live with this certainty shapes how we live and affects all our relationships, including our relationships with all of creation, our ancestors, and the next generations. Built into every relationship is its ending. We are accompanying each other to death's door.

I am learning how this awareness—or lack thereof—changes everything. In 2006 a few of us started a non-profit organization, Doorway Into Light, and began presenting educational events and trainings, bringing together educators and practitioners in the fields of conscious living and dying, compassionate care of the dying, green burial, home funerals, and after-death care. As well, we wanted to identify those in our community interested in supporting community-based efforts in these areas.

In 2007 we initiated a monthly gathering we called "Being with Dying," and we invited "those dying, their families, caregivers to the dying, those grieving, and all those wishing to explore their own approaching death." Now in its eighth year, this gathering attracts a wide spectrum of the community. We started training volunteer caregivers who provide free in-home care to the dying, often working with the local hospice. We began training and supporting a dying person's own family and friends into caregiving teams.

We started building simple, handcrafted caskets to sell at a fraction of the cost of the most inexpensive caskets offered by the local funeral homes. In 2012, we opened Doorway Into Light's The Death Store, Hawaii's only non-profit funeral home and only certified green funeral home. We offer home funerals and ocean body burial (the only funeral home in Hawaii with this service).

From the start, we decided to reinvent and revolutionize the funeral home, expanding its role in the community to serve as an educational resource center for the living or to be visited before someone dies. Our center brings death more into the cultural commons

and conversation. It has lending and reference libraries, a bookstore, home funeral supplies, and eco-safe urns and caskets. Our staff includes funeral directors, a bedside notary, end-of-life and bereavement counselors, interfaith ministers, ceremonial guides, and trained volunteer caregivers to the dying. We provide many counseling services. We also have a "lighter side of death" section with our logo wear, our "Hawaiian coffee to die for" (it's coffin-ated!), cards, and bumper stickers. We wish to bring lightness to the fields of death and dying, but without treating it lightly.

On a typical day, a family may come in completely distraught and in shock, emotionally broken by a recent death, wanting to arrange a viewing and burial. Someone else may walk in looking for an urn, another just wanting to talk, another person wanting help with creating an advance health care directive. Someone else may arrive, curious about what we're up to, or not sure why they're here. Sometimes parents and their children, just by feeling welcomed here, sitting having tea and looking around, finally have the conversations that need to happen. People show up needing a safe place to grieve. Mom and Dad and their kids come in; their dog died recently. They are really hurting.

The 1983 hearse draws out conversations. We offer support, a listening ear and heart, silence and spaciousness. We're not selling. When people feel that, they're surprised and then at ease. We ask good questions, seeking to draw out people's own inner wisdom and knowing, to reveal how we can best serve. We'll pray with and for some of them, never prey upon them, a common experience for many who visit a typical funeral home. We help people save money. We're out to transform the ways people are dying, the ways they are cared for, and the ways dying and death are viewed in this culture. We're out to reclaim it as sacred community work best done by everyone. We're out to transform a culture that is consuming the world.

Life-phobia is the unwillingness or inability to be fully alive. To be fully alive requires a healthy and active relationship with our approaching death. There is no life without death. A healthy life includes its death. All our food, regardless of our diet, requires death. Plants grow from soil filled with decaying and dying life.

Death feeds life. What if a good death is one that feeds people by teaching them what dying asks of us when we meet it face forwards? Welcome to The Death Store.

Bodhi Be is the executive director of Doorway Into Light. He is also an interfaith minister in a Sufi lineage, a funeral director, end-of-life and bereavement counselor, hospice volunteer, coffin maker, and founder of The Death Store, TheDeathStore.com, DoorwayIntoLight.org, info@doorwayintolight.org.

Photo courtesy of Doorway into Light

Green Down Under

by Joe Sehee

Several years ago, a friend of mine actually chortled when I used the term *green burial movement* while I was discussing my time heading up the Green Burial Council. I remember feeling offended and unsettled by the comment. I'd react differently today. Not only can I detach from that kind of snarkiness, but it's now clear to many more people that the trend toward end-of-life rituals that better serve the needs of people and the planet qualifies as a legitimate environmental/social/consumer movement by any standard.

When I relocated to Australia with my family nearly three years ago, I made the conscious decision to avoid taking on a leadership role to advance green burial in this part of the world. I knew Australia already had the benefit of a number of dedicated, competent individuals in almost every major population area working to encourage more ecologically conscious customs to care for the dead. It seemed like a matter of time before the concept would come into its own. Yet as green burial steadily comes into mainstream consciousness in the US, nothing remotely resembling a movement has coalesced in Australia.

One reason, as my Australian-born wife likes to constantly point out, is that this is, in fact, a different country. Movements of any kind are a bit less common down here, in part, because Australians seem more inclined to solve problems through government. As French political thinker and historian Alexis de Toqueville observed while travelling throughout the US a couple hundred years ago, America has long been a place where people come together to tackle pressing matters through nongovernmental organizations—unlike almost anywhere else in the developed world. What makes America like this? Mostly, it's the low expectations that Americans have of their public sector. In Australia, the government plays a much bigger role in improving the lives of its citizenry and involves them in everything from health care, education, and transportation at the federal level, to the weekly "philosophy salon" I've been attending at an Italian café, underwritten by my local city council.

While an empowered, well-funded government has its obvious benefits, one not so great externality is that it can make people less inclined to take matters into their own hands, and for some odd reason, a bit more likely to accept the status quo. This is particularly evident in the way Australians have come to care for the dead. I've observed that many families, including my own when my father-in-law died, feel that the appropriate thing to do after the loss of a loved one is to call not only a funeral home, but the *local* funeral home, as if this were an obligation because they live in some sort of assigned death precinct. Almost no one seems concerned by such things as the large number of Australian funeral homes (more than 40%) that are owned by one publicly traded corporation, or the absence of any licensure requirements in order to become a funeral director in Australia.

My wife, Juliette, who worked as a hospice volunteer and home funeral guide in the US, will still, on occasion, offer guidance on end-of-life matters whenever asked, as she was recently by friends of a family that just had a relative succumb to suicide. Rather than conferring with Juliette about their rights and options, the family decided to "just let their local funeral home sort things out" for them. Unfortunately, at the present time, only a small percentage of funeral homes in Australia seem inclined to bring up the possibility of eco-friendly options to the families they serve. The excuse I continue to hear among funeral industry folks is that "no one is asking for this"—an adage that each time causes me to shoot back: "And how often do you go into a restaurant and order something that you can't find on the menu?"

One problem for green burial in Australia is that the concept—at least as it has come to be defined in the US—is not much of a departure from their conventional practices, products, or facilities. Embalming, for example, is far less prevalent in Australia. Almost no one I've talked with believes it to be necessary—an issue that continues to confuse many families in the US. Burial vaults, which most cemetery operators in the US insist on as a condition for internment at their facilities, are never required at any cemetery in Australia. Few people here have ever seen or heard of a burial vault (even though they are used on rare occasion). This unfamiliarity with burial vaults also seems to be the case with just about everyone else living outside North America.

Another constraint right now is that green burial ground prototypes in Australia are situated within conventional cemeteries—typically run by governmental authorities such as municipalities and cemetery trusts—which have cordoned off areas for eco-conscious families, similar to what they've done for many ethnic and religious communities. While some operators have developed these sections with input from the local community, none has the kind of compelling story as do so many natural and conservation burial grounds in the US, where ritual gets integrated into the restoration process, and families are made to feel like they're involvement is really needed at these sites.

One other aesthetic issue is that Australian green burial grounds are almost always situated on formerly undeveloped, surplus parcels rather

Joe Sehee

Kangaroos at the Northern Cemetery, Melbourne, Australia

than within any sort of charismatic landscape. There are plans in the works, however, for at least two stand-alone green burial grounds adjacent to protected natural areas.

Despite the lack of green burial grounds and eco-conscious funeral service providers coming on line, there have been other advances in Australia that may eventually impact the movement in the US and beyond. The first is what Pia Interlandi, head of the Melbourne-based Natural Death Advocacy Network and a recently appointed faculty member in the College of Fashion Design at RMIT University, calls "garments for the grave." This beautiful clothing alternative to shrouds is made from materials that rapidly degrade in the ground.

I've been involved here as a consultant with another end-of-life innovation: a casket made with 100% Forest Stewardship Council-certified veneer and a small amount of eco-friendly plywood. This casket has been designed by two recent design school graduates to keep a body significantly cooler than any other on the market, thanks to a novel cross-ventilation system. In addition, the lid has been engineered to collapse at the time of interment, rather than years later when most caskets collapse, so as to prevent the kind of "settling" and "renovation" of graves that causes most cemetery operators in the US and Canada to require the use of burial vaults. And because these burial containers can be flat-packed, they can be shipped directly and inexpensively to funeral consumers.

Every now and again I get the sense that green burial will yet emerge as an idea that resonates with people in Australia as it has in the US. One of those moments came a few weeks ago at the Melbourne debut of *A Will for the Woods*, the award-winning documentary film about a dying man's last wish to use his green burial to help protect a small tract of woodland in North Carolina. While participating on the Q &A panel after the screening, a green burial enthusiast in the audience grabbed the roaming mike. She said that what was holding back green burial in Australia was the lack of established standards for the concept like those established in the US. I didn't address her comment at the time, but realized later that she might have hit the nail on the head.

Setting forth verifiable standards may be the single best organizing tool for bringing about a green burial movement in Australia or anywhere else. It requires buy-in from a diverse group of stakeholders that helps to lay a foundation of receptivity for the concept. It means future funeral consumers get involved in a manner previously unavailable to them, while providers get the opportunity to listen and learn. This allows for green burial to become not only more defined and real, but also more personal and relevant. Perhaps most importantly, it keeps the concept from ever becoming just the purview of an operator or authority and instead places green burial where it belongs—in the hearts of those who find solace in the notion that death really can connect with life.

Joe Sehee is the founder and former Executive Director of the Green Burial Council. A former Jesuit minister and Peabody Award-winning journalist, he is currently a Senior Fellow with the Environmental Leadership Program, as well as a consultant to cemetery operators and conservation organizations. Contact Joe Sehee at joesehee@gmail.com.

The Making of Heart Land Prairie Cemetery

by Sarah Crews

If someone had asked me in 2005, "What do you think you'll be doing in ten years?" opening Kansas' first all-natural burial ground would have seemed, by far, the most unlikely answer I could have given. At the time, I was thoroughly settled in Prescott, AZ, with my family. After staying at home for many years to raise our girls, I had returned to work, playing music and teaching art in a nursing home. I found that I was often called to the bedside of a dying resident, guitar in hand, to bring quiet music and a soft presence to the final journey. These moving experiences led me first into hospice work and then back to school where I completed a bachelor's degree in aging and end-of-life, followed by a master's in spiritual care at end-of-life.

As part of my studies, I enrolled in "Being with Dying," Roshi Joan Halifax's extraordinary training at Upaya Zen Center, in Santa Fe, NM. At the end of a week-long silent retreat, we spent the last day able to verbally connect with others in the program. One of my fellow attendees said something to me along the lines of, "If you really want to provide spiritual care at the end of life you ought to look into how you can help *after* someone dies. So many people are working with hospice, but not enough are focusing on after-death care and sustainable burial practices." He told me about the book *Caring for the Dead* (1998) by Lisa Carlson, updated and revised by Carlson and Josh Slocum in 2012 under the title *Final Rights*. Having just discovered my calling in end-of-life care, it had not occurred to me to explore after-death care, and, frankly, at this point, I didn't yet see the spiritual link. But I found the notion intriguing and tucked it away in the back of my mind.

Several years later, while researching the environmental impact of my area of study, as required by the educational program at Prescott College, I picked up *Grave Matters* by Mark Harris. It was from those pages that the ideas of both home funerals and green burial hit me squarely in the heart, and I passionately began to pursue both.

At this point, I was not only working to provide music care for hospice, but also I had spent several years as a bereavement counselor. I was familiar with our society's struggle in accepting the myriad challenges associated with death and dying. I had accompanied many families as they traversed the very natural, though often difficult process of dying. And I had participated in many funerals. I had watched many a steel coffin lowered into the ground or raised high on a platform into an above-ground mausoleum. I had stood on unnaturally green astro-turf, carefully placed to hide any exposed soil from the digging of the grave which was now lined with concrete, plastic or steel, waiting to accept the ornate coffin held above it on a mechanical lowering device. I had held hands with a grieving daughter who told me about her shock at seeing the ghastly, curved smile the embalmer had carefully arranged on her mother's face. I had witnessed the disconnect so many have felt with laying their loved ones to rest in these resource-intensive, expensive, culturally accepted ways. The pages of a funeral director's general price list imply that we have a lot of choice; the reality is that our choices, as presented, are very limited. So, while reading the following words in the preface of Harris' book, I knew I was onto something important:

"Families choose natural burial because it achieves the very end our modern funeral industry labors to prevent at literally all costs: to allow, and even invite, the decay of one's physical body—its tissue, and bone, its cache of organic components—and return what remains to the very elements it sprang from, as directly and simply as possible ... to give back to the earth some very small measure of the vast resources they drew from it in life and, in the process, perpetuate the cycles of nature, of growth and decay, of death and rebirth, that sustain all of us."

"… to give back to the earth some very small measure of the vast resources they drew from it in life and, in the process, perpetuate the cycles of nature, of growth and decay, of death and rebirth, that sustain all of us."

In 2012, my husband, Tim, and I moved to central Kansas where he began work as research director for The Land Institute in Salina. While he set to the task of developing a perennial polyculture to change the way we do agriculture, I set about exploring how to open a natural burial ground to change the way we do burial. Or, more accurately, to start doing burial the way our pioneering ancestors did before the advent of the modern cemetery.

As you might suspect, the trickiest part in starting a cemetery is acquiring the land. I wrote a proposal to the Board of The Land Institute, whose mission it is to promote the connection of people, land and community as vital to a prosperous and enduring future. I was fortunate they understood that the option of a natural, ecologically sound burial on a piece of restoration prairie would benefit the whole community, indeed the entire state, for years to come, and that such an offering was uniquely in line with their

mission. They agreed to donate 13.5 acres of land to the project.

The future home of Heart Land Prairie Cemetery (HLPC) lies in the southern portion of Ottawa County in central Kansas, just northeast of Salina. It is adjacent to a piece of natural prairie that has never been plowed. The cemetery will be a restoration prairie project. While there is alfalfa currently cultivated on the land, we will be replanting with only native prairie species, eventually restoring the approximately eight acres of bury-able land to natural prairie. The cemetery will seek natural burial certification from the Green Burial Council. (See www.greenburialcouncil.org for more information on their certification standards.) Only un-embalmed bodies in biodegradable containers or simple shrouds will be accepted. Grave markers will be low or flush with the ground. There will be no vaults or above-ground monuments. The cost for a grave site will be comparable to the purchase of one in a conventional cemetery (without the added expenses of conventionally required burial products), and families will be given the option to participate in the digging or covering of the grave.

Heart Land Green Burial, Inc., was founded as a non-profit in 2014 for the sole purpose of operating the natural cemetery. The application process was pretty straightforward. We sought the assistance of an attorney who specializes in non-profit formation to be sure we had all our i's dotted and t's crossed.

Community members have stepped forward, eager to help with the new cemetery. Our initial Board consists of an artist, a biologist, a soil-scientist, the former director of the city's health department, a physician, and me, a singer-songwriting home funeral guide!

Our first order of business was to apply for a special use permit from the Ottawa County commissioners. The process went through the county zoning board; its members were generally very supportive of the idea, but had a lot of questions regarding burial depth and concerns related to the fact that the area of land is in a 100-year flood plain. We assuaged their fears of Hurricane Katrina-style floating coffins since we won't be using sealed burial containers, and we emphasized the strength and depth of the root systems of intact prairie against high water conditions.

The commissioners had a more difficult time coming to terms with the 3.5-foot grave depth recommended by the Green Burial Council and other experts in the field of natural burial. One board member told the group an anecdotal tale of injury, apparently shared by a mortician friend of his in Colorado, stressing the importance of a six-foot grave depth! We explained the origins of that mythology (the plague in the Middle Ages) and the modern cemetery policy of accommodating a large concrete vault. In spite of all the information we provided the commissioners about animal scent barrier depth and soil microbial activity, some on the committee were still convinced that the graves needed to be five feet deep, even though there are no regulations regarding grave depth in Kansas. After further discussion, our special use permit was approved with the condition that we dig graves to a minimal depth of four feet.

Our next order of business is to launch a crowd-source fundraising campaign to raise the $10,000 required by the state to hold in a Permanent Maintenance Trust, as well as other start-up costs including various site improvements and the purchase of equipment and native prairie seed mix.

I am very grateful to the trail-blazers around the country who have provided so much support and expert advice to me throughout this process: Freddy Johnson, of Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery in Gainesville, FL; Ellen Macdonald, of Eloise Woods near Austin, TX.; the Green Burial Council, specifically, Joe Sehee, who met with

my husband and me over a delicious breakfast in Santa Fe to discuss the idea with us in 2012; Brian Flowers, who corresponded with me and gave me a tour in 2013 of the natural burial ground he manages in Washington state; and my colleague at the National Home Funeral Alliance and GBC board member, Lee Webster. Without their help this entire endeavor would not have been possible.

Heart Land Prairie Cemetery will be the first of its kind in Kansas. There are a couple conventional cemeteries in the state that currently offer "green" or natural burial in a designated area. HLPC will be unique as a restoration prairie burial ground. We will be establishing hiking trails with stops along the way to sit in the beauty and quiet of nature, to watch the hawks and clouds move across the sky.

Sarah is a singer/songwriter and dabbler in the arts; she loves to swim and hike. She is the mother of two incredible grow-up girls and one mellow, old dog. She serves on the board of the National Home Funeral Alliance, educating and advocating for families who choose to take care of their own at death.

R.I.P Off!: Or the British Way of Death

by Ken West

Review by Charles Cowling

RIP Off! Is Ken West's thinly fictionalized account of his 1993 pioneering introduction of natural burial to Carlisle, UK. In it he contrasts the enthusiastic reception his invention received in the media and among the general public with the fear and loathing it aroused in local undertakers.

They didn't understand it and regarded it as a threat, both to their commercial interests and their professional status. They didn't like Ken's mission to empower the bereaved with information. They didn't like his advocacy of low-cost funerals and his insinuation that undertakers charge too much. They were infuriated by his charm, his humor, and his success in creating publicity for his revolutionary way of disposing of the dead. They have worked to undermine and discredit him.

Considering the battering Ken has taken in real life from the "Dismal Trade," you'll not be surprised to see him settle scores in *RIP Off!* But his weapon of choice is satire, not invective. He debunks, but he is gracious in victory, although this is not how some undertakers might see it. They ought to console themselves that it could have been a lot worse.

I suspect Ken has cause to feel much angrier than he lets on, but he refuses to cast himself as a victim, and he rises serenely above rancor. I think this is indicative of the strength of character he needed, as a local authority officer, to steer his innovative scheme for green burial through to implementation. It is rare to see the public service at the cutting edge of anything. In addition to zeal, persuasiveness, and perseverance, there must have been cunning, too—of the most ethical sort, of course.

RIP Off! reads more like a thinly fictionalized memoir than a novel because it doesn't have a conventional

plot which concludes, after a period of suspense, in a resolution. It begins as story, then becomes more episodic and anecdotal. That's not meant as a criticism. There are plenty of insights into the hidden world of the funeral business to keep you turning the pages, together with some cracking stories reworked (they have to be) from personal experience; many of them are much stranger than fiction.

As early as page two, Ken characterizes undertakers as a mafia. He pinpoints with deadly accuracy their insecurities and vanities: "all Round Table and moral rectitude." He makes a dig at their disposition to think too well of themselves. A great many people who work in crematoria will cheer when they read: "The measure of a dominant funeral director was his belief that he could call the tune at all the local cemeteries and crematoria; that he could act as the top dog, as if he owned the entire facility and its staff."

Okay, occasionally Ken can be cruel: "Brian said he could always get work because he had an O level (a British high school test), and this made the more cynical funeral directors refer to him as "the Professor." But Ken can be kind, too. The portrayals of Roger, the cut-price undertaker, and Graham, who ends up working for a corporate outfit, are not unsympathetic.

The British undertakers' trade association (BALU) embodies the self-esteem and secretiveness of its members, viewing them as "the only ones who could judge what people really needed. They were convinced that too much information would confuse and upset the bereaved; that they can be told too much." Not much change there, then.

If the independents are nothing to write home about, the corporates are worse. When one undertaker sells out to a corporate-based operation in Manchester, "it stuck in [his] craw that although he had not provided cheap funerals, he had never been this greedy."

It is the settled view of the undertakers in *RIP Off!* that the hero, Ben West (see what I mean about thinly disguised), is "an isolated green weirdo" and a "fucking smartarse." Worse, he is "an advocate of change and this ... was intolerable." The story is an account of the undertakers' fight back. Each side enjoys victories. Or, rather, the undertakers win some skirmishes, but Ben is in the business of not picking a fight with them. He campaigns in the public arena for cheaper, greener, more authentic funerals. Everyone is left standing at the end, by which time, the record shows, natural burial has gone global, although not necessarily in the form Ben West originally envisioned.

West is an environmentalist and, as appealing as natural burial is to those who would tread lightly on the Earth, it

is one of the undertakers who comes to understand what natural burial means to most people: "Graham realized that Ben had got it wrong all those years ago. Sure, there were a few people wanting to save the planet, but the majority were seeking something else, here and now, something that enabled the soul to go on."

Briefly, the future isn't green, it's spiritual.

It is Graham, too, who reflects at the end of the book that Ben "was still a voice in the wilderness. Where are they, all those young activists, the new greens, who were going to step into his shoes and give funeral directing a hard time?"

I think we may be more optimistic. The novel describes restrictive practices, notably the prevention by threats of a coffin manufacturer and transport provider dealing directly with the public. In the UK today, a good many coffin suppliers deal directly with the public, and these include James Hardcastle and his self-drive hearse. Things are getting better.

Alongside the story, *RIP Off!* contains lots of good anecdotes, many of them funny, some touching, some instructive. There's an exhumation and a glimpse inside a pathology lab. There are the messages people leave on graves for their dead ones, including one beginning with the words "We have moved."

The humor is dark, shading into black. Ken can be extremely funny. Roger's ancient bearers occasionally let him down by dropping dead. "This was a double-edged sword; he lost a bearer but he gained a funeral." There is no sex in the book, but it concludes with an exhortation to readers to have more.

RIP Off! isn't just an account of the birth pangs of natural burial. Its broader theme is the British way of death, and there's no mistaking where Ken's heart lies. It is with simple, down-to-earth funerals, organized by empowered people whose farewells are heartfelt and whose understanding is that our dead bodies are to be returned to the earth from whence they came in such a way that they can do the most good.

RIP Off! offers the general reader a fascinating insight into the strange and covert world of death and funerals. Those who work in the industry will agree that it holds a mirror up to what goes on. Whether it's fair or not is up for debate, but it is unquestionably funny and informative.

Charles Cowling is editor of The Good Funeral Guide Blog *at goodfuneralguide.co.uk.*

R.I.P. Off! or The British Way of Death
Paperback, 256pp
Publisher: Matador, October 2013
ISBN # 978-1-783061-48-8

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Chaplain

by Amy Wright Glenn

Excerpt from

Birth, Breath & Death: Meditations on Motherhood, Chaplaincy, and Life as a Doula

Clark and I sat in Lisa's cozy kitchen in Newport, Rhode Island. A lovely tapestry was draped over her dining room table. Her two cats scampered throughout the apartment as we laughed, enjoyed a glass of wine, and cleaned up after dinner. Then the conversation became serious. Lisa worked as an oncology nurse. She began to share stories about supporting patients through healing and dying. Intrigued, I came up with a thought experiment centered upon death's mystery.

If the answer to the ever-intriguing question about what happens after death was visible underneath Lisa's dining room table tapestry, would we look? To clarify, I explained that this vision would not include details about our own future deaths. Rather, we would perceive what happens after death for everyone. Was reincarnation true? Did consciousness dissolve as brain functioning ceased? Would we see that one religion reigned supreme in its theological proclamations concerning the afterlife? Would we encounter something that even in our wildest dreams we could not imagine? Would we tell anyone if we did look? Something indeed happens after we die. What would it mean to comprehend the truth about death?

We discussed and debated this for hours. Clark felt certain he would never look under the tapestry. His love for mystery and lack of fear of the unknown explained his reasoning. I wanted truth. Imagine actually apprehending this illusive, treasured, and so often feared unknown. Lisa could see both of our points of view and remained undecided.

What if one looked only to discover a horror? I trusted the love I've experienced in life enough not to fear this possibility. But would I really look? It's one thing to philosophize about aligning one's life with truth; it's quite another to purposefully confront its life-altering power. Throughout history, people have claimed to know the truth about the afterlife. They were deemed delusional or prophetic.

For years, I've used this "Tapestry Exercise" in my religion and philosophy classes. It never fails to provoke a powerful and, at times, difficult discussion. Becoming a doula transformed my teaching and my life. From the moment I heard about hospital chaplaincy, I knew a similar transformation was in store for me. As if it were alchemy, the training refined my very soul.

Much wisdom is found in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Chaplains practice holding open, loving, and holy space in the most difficult of times. Throughout my CPE training, the pluralistic, intellectually open, and progressive Unitarian Universalist (UU) tradition sustained me. I also drew on the solid bedrock foundation of my meditation and yoga practices. They provided immediately accessible centering techniques when coping with trauma. I needed all of the strength I could muster. I spent many long nights holding the hands of the sick and dying in a large, urban, New Jersey hospital.

We were an eclectic bunch. Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics, Evangelical Korean Protestants, and Rabbis joined me for this journey. I was the only UU. Most of my fellow students were completing their CPE unit as a requirement for their future in church ministry. My goals were more personal: I wanted to experience the bookend of doula work. Knowing how powerful it had been to hold the hands of the birthing, I knew that much wisdom was to be gained from standing at the other end of life's threshold. One learns much about life by witnessing death.

Every Wednesday night we gathered for a five-hour training session. Specialists from different hospital departments, such as the emergency room and oncology, visited and gave informative talks. Occasionally hospital chaplains witness joyful recoveries, but the majority of our work entails a direct encounter with life's repellent and frightening realities. Together, our group considered the following questions: What does it mean to enter a patient's room and be a compassionate witness to his or her pain? What does it mean to embody an open heart in the presence of great and unimaginable loss? What does it mean to die?

We spent many hours discussing the stages of grief and the process of dying, which provided ample material for sleepless nights' reflections. For nine months we tried to befriend, or at least acknowledge, the fear that is death's companion. Author and teacher David Deida writes, "Almost everything you do, you do because you are afraid to die. And yet dying is exactly what you are doing, from the moment you are born." I had encountered this sentiment before, during my time in India. According to the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, all fear roots back to Abhinivesh, the fear of death. For example, we fear shame because it is a death to the ego. We fear aging because it is a death to our youth. In Buddhist teaching, all moments are born and die into each other. Leaving the womb is a death of one state of existence and a birth into another realm. Childhood dies into puberty and the elderly experience the death of their young adult years.

While I appreciated Deida's insights about our fear of death, his reflections on suffering moved me to tears. He writes, "You were born as a sacrifice. And either you can participate in this sacrifice, dissolving in the giving of your gift, or you can resist it, which is your suffering."

So much of my own suffering resulted from resistance to the reality of life's impermanence. So much of the suffering I witnessed as a chaplain also directly connected to resistance. Of course, one fiercely resists accepting the premature death of beloved ones. I don't even want to imagine the pain of losing those closest to my heart to an early, tragic death. Yet, chaplaincy training required me to do just this. I had to face my own resistance in order to offer a semblance of calm to heartsick hospital patients and their families.

Deida's teaching also offered vital ballast for my steady navigation through the rough waters of hospital chaplaincy. I am called to give my gifts. I was born to learn, serve, and dissolve into a deep love for the mystery that sustains me. In this sense, I was born as a sacrifice. I vowed to participate in this reality as bravely as possible.

At the age of fourteen, Amy Wright Glenn began to question the Mormon faith of her family. She embarked on a lifelong personal and scholarly quest for truth. While teaching comparative religion and philosophy, Amy was drawn to the work of supporting women through labor and holding compassionate space for the dying.

Amy shares moving tales of birth and death while drawing on her work as a birth doula, and hospital chaplain and her own experience of motherhood.

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128pp, 5" x 7.8"
Publisher: CreateSpace, March 2013
ISBN # 978-1-482079-82-1

The Beloved Can Only Be Everything

by Dale Borglum

The poet Rumi wisely said that grief is the garden of compassion. In a fundamental sense, spiritual practice is the inner work of transforming the separation inherent in grief into the connectedness of compassion, which is our true nature. So long as we live with unresolved grief in our hearts, grief that has not been transformed into compassion, our lives are lived only partially and death comes too soon. We are all grieving until we no longer feel separate—separate from those we care about, separate from our own true selves, separate from God.

Those who have had a near-death experience often report that they have learned three things about life: We are completely loved and cherished; there is absolutely nothing to fear; and, we can never do anything wrong. These are the truths that will be revealed to all who step beyond feelings of separation. These are the truths that are the sweet fruits of spiritual practice—meditation, contemplation, and prayer.

Again and again we begin movement toward wholeness from a place of fear and separation. Finding motivation in the midst of these feelings requires great honesty and the courage to ask from the depths of our hearts for surrender into this compassion. Can we trust that compassion will carry us from woundedness to wholeness? Only by letting go, again and again, into the spaciousness, the emptiness of self that is our heart, not knowing what will happen, will we see that each experience, each moment, can reveal the Beloved, the Beloved who can only be everything.

Once I was called to the bedside of a tiny, week-old baby whose birth had gone horribly wrong. The birth process had deprived his brain of oxygen for much too long. He had only brainstem activity and couldn't think, see, hear, or swallow. He seemed to have no connection with the outside world except a slight response to touch. Ostensibly I was there to help him die well, but really, the crying need was to help his parents survive their almost unbearable grief. Every time I visited their home, I first picked up and held the baby. While holding him I went into a state of deep bliss. My guess was that since he hadn't been pulled into the world by his senses at all, he remained in a state beyond fear, a state we might call love; entirely pure, boundless—a space available to each of us now. Becoming fresh again, becoming selfless, touching the nature of experience and letting go of the incessant need to understand experience was the gift he gave me. We find that our nature truly is love, compassion. The Beloved can only be everything.

A few days ago, I visited my dear friend Josh, who is in a rather advanced stage of the disease ALS; he is gradually losing his ability to breathe. For short, frightening periods of time, Josh can't catch his breath. Imagine that you almost suffocate again and again. Could you or I remember at such a moment what the baby showed me and what people who had near-death experiences have reported? Can we find the strength, the courage, to surrender into the boundless emptiness of compassion where there is nothing to fear, knowing that we are loved? Can we see even the failing body as the Beloved?

On the wall near the reclining chair Josh rarely leaves is attached one of my favorite quotes, a quote which seems to be a perfect description of his situation and, of course, also of ours:

We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we will see that we are nothing, and being nothing we are everything. That is all.

– Kalu Rinpoche

Dale Borglum is founder and executive director of the Living/Dying Project, livingdying.org.

Crestone Funeral Pyre

I can feel the ceremonial energy of this place
All alone, I walk toward the funeral pyre

As some divine inspiration takes over,
I climb onto the pyre and lie down
(is this ok?)
(should I be doing this?)
I lie down for quite a while.

All alone on the pyre
Looking up at the sky

A woman approaches me
She has a weathered face, years gone by
She's glowing
as if she's on fire
She sits beside the pyre
She tells me of times before
Times when we used to say goodbye to each other

Days when we felt our grief
and were renewed through it
Nights when we wailed
When we beat the ground with our fists
and let our tears flow freely
Times when the souls of our deceased loved ones
followed the sound of our cries
and found their way home.

Strength

acrylic on canvas 24" x 36"
by Diana Zucco

Consultations, Counseling, Needs Assessments and Referrals
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My Beloved, I held him tightly in my arms as he coiled and burst forth like a summer seed into the fullness of his fruit.
I will tell you: He did not die, he lifted like a martial artist from his body, great master of the art of Soul.
He did not die, I can tell you because he did not die in my arms.
He flew right through me when he passed.