

Natural burial sermon
Neighbourhood Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
November 26, 2006

Meditation: LET ME DIE LAUGHING

We are all dying, our lives always moving toward completion.

We need to learn to live with death, and to understand that death is not the worst of all events.

We need to fear not death, but life – empty lives, loveless lives, lives that do not build upon the gifts that each of us have been given, lives that are like living deaths, lives which we never take the time to savor and appreciate, lives in which we never pause to breathe deeply.

What we need to fear is not death, but squandering the lives we have been miraculously given.

So let me die laughing, savoring one of life's crazy moments.

Let me die holding the hand of one I love, and recalling that I tried to love and was loved in return.

Let me die remembering that life has been good, and that I did what I could.

But today, just remind me that I am dying so that I can live, savor and love with all my heart.

~ Been in the Storm So Long, 1991 by The Rev Mark Morrison-Reed

Sermon: Natural Burials

We are all dying, our lives always moving toward completion. You might not think that a very cheery thought on this end of November morning, but just as the darkening days remind us that the year is also moving toward completion, we can also remember that in a few short months, we will celebrate the return of life and light. So while Natural Burials, this morning's sermon topic, is about death, just below the surface (three feet under to be exact), it's also about the potential for new life. It's about how your death can help to create a sacred and protected green space called a natural burial ground, full of native plants and trees, and birds and butterflies, where your friends and family will come to remember you. Our bodies, returned to the soil, through decomposition, can help create new life.

Think compost.

This morning's service recognizes the Lay Chaplains in your congregation, who work with the family and friends of the deceased to create memorial services. A meaningful memorial service honours the accomplishments and values of that individual.

Perhaps you have already imagined your funeral and how you would like your life to be celebrated. Perhaps you've also thought about what will happen to your body after you die.

If we look at how some traditions honour and dispose of their loved ones, then by comparison, we can reflect about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist in that context. Just as we spend our lives in the search for truth and meaning, and come together in community to inspire and help each other live lives of principle, the question this morning is how do we maintain those principles in death?

Our lives leave a legacy. Maybe the architect of some of London's architectural masterpieces, Sir Christopher Wren, captured it when he said: "If you want to see my monument, look around you".

Since I'm not an architect of a great city, I'd like to describe how a natural burial would carry on my values in death by creating a monument that reflects my life.

Apparently the **Ancient Egyptians** agreed with the adage that the one who dies with the most toys wins. They believed they could take it all with them. That their wealth, servants, and personal belongings would come in handy in their next life. Their bodies were also a necessary part of the equation, so the mummies we admire in museums today, are actually remarkably preserved bodies, kept dry for centuries in their desert tombs.

The Jewish tradition believes that upon death, the body and soul are returned to god, which means that for burial, there is some urgency to inter the body as soon as possible, and not to leave it in the land of the living. Cremation is not allowed because according to Jewish law, the body was a gift from god who expects us to take care of ourselves and be returned in the best possible condition. Keeping the body intact also has implications for organ donations and embalming, which are seen as acts of desecration of the body.

For most Buddhists, the body is customarily burned at death, just as the Buddha's body was cremated. Monks comfort the dying with chants: "Even the gorgeous royal chariots wear out; and indeed this body too wears out. But the teaching of goodness does not age: and so Goodness makes that known to the good ones". As the body is being prepared for the funeral fire, monks continue to chant in order to help the energies be released from their fading personality.

Hindus also believe that the soul is reincarnated upon death. Bodies are wrapped in a shroud and cremated, sometimes on a pyre. The Hindu faith dictates that the ashes must be washed or placed into a holy river, for their final cleaning. Anyone who has been to Varanasi in India, will be familiar with this ritual on the banks of the Ganges.

Ashes also play an important role **in the Christian tradition**. The concept of “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” originates in Genesis, and was adapted to the Funeral Service in the Book of Common Prayer. The words are to be said by celebrant when earth is ceremoniously thrown on the casket.

The original Genesis 3:19 reads: By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Which was reinterpreted as the more familiar:

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother <name>; and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious unto him and give him peace. Amen.

For me, a resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ has no resonance, but the “earth to earth; ashes to ashes, dust to dust” certainly seems to reflect the cyclical nature of our lives and echoes our seventh Unitarian Universalist principle of the interconnectedness of all existence.

So we now turn to **What’s a good UU to do?** There’s no prescribed formula to follow or rites to be administered. So when we do come to die, how can we arrange a funeral and disposition that reflects our Unitarian values?

What matters to you?

I’ve touched a bit on natural burial, but you might be asking yourself just exactly what is a natural burial and how a natural burial ground works. It’s a return to the earth of an unembalmed body in a biodegradable shroud or plain pine box. A native tree or shrub can be planted to mark the grave in a natural, protected burial ground.

Being buried in such a place is my goal. It would be a fitting monument to my life for three reasons: it’s good for the environment; it’s simple, and for me, it’s spiritually meaningful.

So, reason number one. It's good for the environment because it creates and preserves green space. Once the bodies are buried, nature take its course, and the bodies gracefully return to the earth. If soil conditions are right, the body placed three feet under can completely decompose in about 12 years. 6 feet down is actually too far down for maximum decomposition. The nutrients help to feed the commemorative native trees or shrubs, which in turn create a new forest or parkland in the protected green space. There's a natural burial ground in Ithaca, New York whose slogan is "Save a forest. Plant yourself."

I am the Executive Director of the Natural Burial Association, and our vision is turn abandoned industrial and commercial sites called brown-fields, or land near Toronto, perhaps on the new Greenbelt, into natural burial grounds, that is, sacred places for friends and family to remember their loved ones. Once land in Ontario is designated a cemetery, it remains protected in perpetuity, so it will be a green space forever.

Reason #2. It's simple and natural

I am a passionate green, and am currently living my values working in the environmental field. I want to decrease my ecological footprint.

The thought of filling my body with toxic embalming fluid before going into an expensive hardwood casket, or contributing to greenhouse gases through cremation, doesn't sit quite right.

Many conventional burial practices are outdated: modern embalming was originally used in the American Civil war to get the solders home for burial. In the days before refrigeration, it may have been practical, but today many people still believe it should be done. Cutting down forests of high quality hardwood trees, simply to be made into caskets and buried, is conspicuous consumption and just doesn't make sense to me in a conservation culture.

The ecological cost of contemporary, conventional burials is steep, forming a part of the ecological crisis few ever think about. Here are a few facts to consider:

According to Green Springs Natural Cemetery, the average U.S. cemetery buries 1,000 gallons of embalming fluid, 97.5 tons of steel, 2,028 tons of concrete, and 56,250 board feet of high quality tropical hardwood in just one acre of green. And then there are the tons of fertilizers, pesticides and water that it takes to keep cemeteries looking well manicured. At one established Toronto cemetery, families spend an average of \$20,000 on burial, with \$50,000 crypts and \$500,000 monuments not being uncommon. With 30 – 35,000 deaths in Toronto every year, the death care business is big business.

And if you think cremation is environmentally benign, think again.

It takes an amazing amount of energy to burn bodies at a high temperature for a couple of hours. Additionally, each cremation releases between .8 and 5.9 grams of mercury as bodies are burned. This amounts to between 1,000 and 7,800 pounds of mercury released each year in the US. I don't have any Canadian stats, but even Environment Canada admits that there are various heavy metals released in the cremation process. To put those numbers into perspective, the Mercury Policy Project says it takes only .002 pounds, or 1/70 of a teaspoon of mercury to contaminate a 25 acre lake, so much that its fish cannot be eaten. Most of this mercury is from dental filings.

I would like my death to continue the trajectory of my life. Natural burials allow people who have loved nature to rest in nature. And those who have fought to help save the earth's health can know that in their death, they will help to preserve and create an ecological oasis.

My life's mission is to motivate people about things that I am passionate about. I am passionate about the environment, spirituality, questioning the status quo and simplicity, and amazingly, I've been able to find a cause that encompasses all of these things. What excites me about the natural burial movement is that people often don't know they have a choice about what happens after they die.

The death care industry doesn't have a great reputation for offering all the options. The average person goes through managing a loved one's death only a few times in their lifetime. It's a time of great stress and grief, and if there's pressure from a sales person, it can lead to something that isn't what they wanted. For me, the simple option is the best choice.

Reason #3 – Create spiritual places for the living

I feel most spiritual and at one with the world in nature, and I can't imagine that feeling is going to go away when I die. I want fields and forest and a view.

Can you imagine your final resting place?

Cemeteries are amazing places. My first memory of a cemetery is from a high school trip to the Normandy beaches in France where we visited the British, American and German war cemeteries. Each had a distinct personality, and I remember them well: The British cemetery, full of lovingly tended gardens and fragrant roses amid carved gravestones was a place of beauty, and felt very tender and personal; In the American cemetery, with standard-issue white crosses extending beyond the horizon, the scale was certainly impressive, but I wasn't able to connect to the individual soldiers who had died. The German cemetery was the most profound. This was a place that remembered those who had lost the war. Short black markers on the ground made it a very somber place indeed.

More recently, I was in Poland last summer and visited Warsaw's Jewish Cemetery. I had intended to have a quick look around, but ended up spending the entire afternoon. More than all the reading I had done, or visiting museums and even Auschwitz itself, wandering around the tumbled graves, and overgrown vegetation helped me understand the absolute devastation of the Polish Jews. The last date inscribed on the headstones is 1942. After the liquidation of the Ghetto the following year, the cemetery fell into disrepair when there was simply no one left to look after it. Warsaw's Jewish cemetery is still in use today, but the pre-second-world-war plots have been left as a testament, so we never forget. It reminded me that cemeteries are important places for the living.

The cemetery where I plan to rest is a natural burial ground that will be green and full of life. Just as the war cemeteries reflect their unique characters, I'd like to see a place where people can enjoy being outside. I'd like to see picnics and family gatherings, as well as a place for reflection and contemplation. In the Green Springs cemetery in Ithaca, they are hoping "for more weddings than funerals". I'd like it to be a place where everyone is welcome, Toronto's diversity is represented, and all faith traditions are celebrated. Inspiration and reflection of nature transcends all boundaries.

So a natural burial is my choice. To me it's taking my Unitarian beliefs into my death. Being wrapped in a biodegradable shroud and buried in a field reminds me that soon my body will return to the earth and its interconnected web. I'll don't think I'll have another reincarnation, so I also plan on offering my organs for donation when I die.

Before this morning, the concept of natural burial might have been new to you. And now, you might want to consider a natural burial but, here's the point in the sermon for the bad news. Yes, natural burial in Toronto is a thing of the future. While there are over 200 natural burial sites in the UK, a few sprinkled in Europe, and just five in the US, there are currently no natural burial sites in Canada. We're working on bringing the concept here.

Until there's a natural cemetery where you would like to be buried, there **are** a number of things you can do to minimize the environmental impact of the disposition of your body.

- Preplan, so your executors know your wishes for a simple funeral
- Donate your organs to continue life, including the restoration of sight or getting someone off dialysis.
- Choose not to be embalmed. The chemicals are harmful to people who handle them and give the earth additional noxious chemicals to deal with.
- If you choose burial, request a simple pine box.
- If you choose cremation, ask that your teeth be removed and consider offsetting the emissions with the purchase of carbon credits.
- Ask that in lieu of flowers, donations be directed to a charity that protects green space.

We are hoping that a natural burial ground will soon be available in the GTA. I hope that someday soon, the chaplains of this congregation will be able to perform funerals at natural burial grounds.

Finally, I hope that you will give some thought to your principles, and how to maintain those principles in death. But in the meantime, I hope that the reminder that we are all dying will remind you to live, to savour and to love with all your heart.