

Religion

From corpse to compost



Stephen Scharper

So, you have spent your whole life trying to decrease your ecological footprint, recycling cans and bottles, avoiding pesticides in your garden, biking and using public transit as much as possible, and helping others value nature.

Now, as you reach the sunset of life, the thought of filling yourself with toxic embalming fluid before going into an expensive, hardwood casket, or contributing to greenhouse gases through cremation, doesn't quite sit right. Is there a "green" burial alternative, you wonder?

If Janet McCausland has her way, the answer here in Canada will soon be, "You bet!"

McCausland is the executive director of the Toronto-based Natural Burial Association, and her mission is to provide an environmentally-friendly alternative to conventional burials in Canada. She espouses "low-impact burials," those that, according to the association brochure, "reduce energy and resource consumption, are less toxic, conserve water, and included materials which are locally produced in a sustainable manner."

While not yet available in Canada, McCausland says green burials are increasingly popular

in the United Kingdom, which has more than 200 natural burial grounds, as well as New Zealand and the U.S., which has seen natural burial sites sprout up in California, New York, Florida and South Carolina. She is working to ensure that such burials will be available here in Canada in the near future.

For Mary Woodsen, president of Green Springs Natural Cemetery Association ("Save a forest. Plant yourself.") in upstate New York, the ecological cost of contemporary, conventional burials is steep, forming a part of the ecological crisis few ever consider.

"On average," she says, "a 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

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acre of green. And then there's the tons of fertilizers, pesticides, and water not to mention emissions like CO₂, nitrates, ozone, soot, and more that it takes to keep cemeteries looking well manicured."

And if you think cremation is more environmentally benign, Woodsen says, think again.

"Each cremation," Woodsen claims, "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."

The alternative, "natural burial," Woodsen describes as "letting nature take its course: no embalming fluid, simple biodegradable caskets, environmentally responsible care of the land, low-density burials, a natural return to the earth, natural stone markers, flush with the earth, or commemorative plantings of native trees and shrubs."

According to the Natural Burial Association, which works cooperatively with the Green Burial Council in the U.S. and the Natural Death Centre in the U.K., natural burial grounds are "green spaces of beauty and ecological renewal." They utilize native species to provide refuge to birds and butterflies, "and groves and wild meadows" to provide solace for the bereaved.

For McCausland, natural burial grounds are also an original way of creating and preserving green spaces, often near urban cores. "One of our dreams," she says, "is to develop brownfields (abandoned industrial and commercial sites) into natural burial grounds."

Natural interment may indeed be an increasingly preferred spiritual alternative as more religious groups engage in ecological reflection and renewal. The Canadian Forum on Religion and Ecology and the Faith and the Common Good Project in Canada are but two examples of hundreds of religious environmental initiatives worldwide,

and as their members are involved in the religious rituals surrounding burials, the green alternative may increase along with their ecological awareness. For McCausland, a Unitarian, the environment has long been a part of her spirituality.

A vegetarian, McCausland sees a direct connection between her advocacy for natural burials and the Seventh Principle of the Unitarian Universalists, which posits "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

The natural death movement also invokes the spiritual qualities of humility and charity. Millions of Christians have heard the humbling reminder on Ash Wednesday that they are "dust" and "unto dust" they shall return, and the idea of a simple, non-polluting, non-ostentatious burial invokes the notion that we, as humans, are "just plain citizens" of the land, rather than its reigning lords and masters.

Such a burial also suggests that in dying we also have a last chance at giving, not only through organ donation, but also through the return to the soil of our very bodies, which in death, through non-toxic decomposition, can help engender new life.

A redemptive thought to carry to the grave.

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