

Green Burials: Giving Back to the Planet

By Lee Webster

“Nature has a way of opening us up to the moment, to our own grief and to the joy of life—a joy we can feel even in the depth of sadness,” says Michelle Menter, burial coordinator at Greensprings Natural Cemetery in Newfield, NY. “It can be the sound of a bird calling, finding a feather on the ground, feeling the wind pick up, or feeling the sun's heat as the clouds part.”

This apt description of what it feels like to attend a burial on a nature burial ground or preserve may surprise you, especially if your experience has been more in “hydraulic equipment, astroturf, mosquito invasions, and awkward receptions” arena. Many of us who have lived a life of environmental intention are awakening to the realization that we can find ways to benefit the planet in death as well as in life. What started in South Carolina in 1998 with Ramsey Creek Preserve has blossomed into more than 300 cemeteries and burial grounds in the US and Canada that encourage burial without impediment.

We are at last waking up to the environmental damage of conventional burials and cremation, including the denuding of forests for exotic hardwoods used to make elaborate caskets, the carbon-heavy production of concrete for vaults that encase those caskets to flatten the lawn for mowing, and the amount of toxic chemicals being spread or injected.

Those chemicals take the form of known carcinogens in embalming fluid that contribute to an eight times higher risk of myeloid leukemia and a three times higher risk of ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease in embalmers, for starters. Add to that the cardiopulmonary and neurological damage experienced by both funeral workers and groundskeepers who are spraying pesticides and herbicides to keep the cemetery grounds pristine, and we get a better understanding about the dangers of continuing these unnecessary

practices. Cremation has its own host of environmentally damaging issues.

Why natural burial? Because natural burial grounds promote sustainable management models that are in sync with conservation best practices. They seek to connect people to the land in a profound and lasting way that encourages further land acquisition by providing a pipeline for future support. Many burial preserves double as a place where families and friends can experience life-affirming community activities: hiking, bird watching, picnicking, even hosting dog parties, yoga classes, weddings and baby blessings. These grounds become a habitat for birds, insects, animals, and humans alike.

Simple pine boxes, shrouds made of biodegradable materials, and native plantings are all part of the burial picture that fosters direct environmental benefits to the land. It has long been proved—in fact, since the beginning of time—that bodies buried at the right level and under the right conditions will become one with the soil naturally, without any interference or assistance, and do not pollute soil or water. Soil in fact, is nature's greatest champion, filtering and absorbing anything that our bodies have taken on during a lifetime.

One of the most compelling reasons to consider a natural burial is the enhanced opportunity for ceremony. With the acceleration of cremation over the past couple of years, the acknowledgement of loss has been swept aside, with families choosing no service or delaying until it is convenient, causing further distancing from the reality and acceptance of death in our day-to-day lives. Natural burial encourages family-led care of the body in preparation of the interment if they choose, and old-school processions, authentic ceremonies, whether assisted or family-inspired and conducted. And you'll know it's a natural burial when you see the line of shovel

handles, even ones for kids, ready for the “cryin’ and diggin’” physical expression of grief.

This all adds up to a picture of empowerment around death that has been eroding over past decades. The advantages are myriad: a closer relationship to the new reality with our familial and social orbit; a more affordable and

responsible way of caring for the dead; and a give-back to the planet and those who remain long after we have exited.

As Menter says, “Folks get a deeper appreciation for the brevity and blessing of life when they experience a natural burial in a nature preserve.”