

Let's All Get on the Same Page about Green Funeral Terms

By Lee Webster

There's a lot of excitement out there about environmentally-friendly death options and simpler after-death care practices. And there is also a great deal of confusion.

Pick just about any online article or webpage that tries to explain the phenomenon of home funeral, green burials, or any combination of the two, and you'll quickly get buried in new concepts using familiar words in unconventional ways, or old words with a new twist, or just plain mismatched concepts and titles. To clear this up, here's a quick cheat sheet to understanding the similarities—and differences—so you can talk like a pro.

The Green Burial Council (GBC) and the National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA) have both recognized the dangers of failing to clearly define the terms they use. To that end, they have each formulated written guides to help steer the public and professionals toward a common language.

In *Clearly Defined: Matching Our Terminology to Our Intentions*, the NHFA explains the differences between death midwives, death doulas, home funeral guides, celebrants, death and dying guides, and more in a handy Venn diagram. They also explain that home funerals, home vigils, and blended funerals (where funeral directors are a vital part of the experience) all have a part in meeting the needs of families.

In their recently published *Glossary of Green Burial Terms*, the GBC also makes an effort to clear up the differences between common terms, and goes further into biological, hydrological, and soil language that one often runs across when investigating both home and green burial. It's worth a look to get a feel for the comprehensive

scope of inquiry that informs green cemetery supporters.

But for those of you on a tight schedule who still want to sound as though you know what you're talking about, here's your golden ticket:

Green or natural burial: A burial system that allows full body interment in the ground in a manner that does not inhibit decomposition. The essential aspects of green burial are the absence of a (cement or metal) grave liner or vault, non-toxic preparation of the body (no embalming), and use of containers made of organic (bio-degradable) materials. By including families more directly, green burial supporters hope to provide a rich, meaningful, and healing graveside experience while furthering legitimate environmental and societal aims such as protecting worker health, reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and preserving native habitat. Funeral director responsibilities are largely the same as in conventional cemeteries, including making arrangements, directing the attendees, and troubleshooting the logistics and family preferences.

Home burial: The practice of full body interment on residential land, usually in a rural setting. Local zoning and health department regulations apply, as do state-approved setbacks for known sources of water, buildings and highways when present. Often these are considered family cemeteries and must be established and reported as such to government agencies, and are usually restricted to blood relatives or extended family.

Home funeral: The process of family and friends, next of kin, or designated agent retaining custody and control of the body for the time period between death and disposition (burial or cremation); sometimes referred to as *home vigil* or DIY funeral. A home funeral often involves bathing and dressing the body and using dry ice or other cooling technique as a preservative for 1-3 days. For many the experience is about avoiding institutional settings and providing personalized care. Typically, family and friends visit during the home funeral.

Home vigil: A home vigil is similar to a home funeral. The terms may be used interchangeably, though home vigil may refer to the practice of family and friends sitting with the body continuously while lying in honor in the home, or it may simply refer to the time period from death to disposition.

Blended funerals: Funerals that combine conventional funeral practices with home funeral and/or green burial practices; may include the use of a funeral director for certain aspects of care, such as obtaining, completing and filing paperwork or

transporting the body. Families may have a home funeral without having a green burial and visa versa. Blended funerals offer families more options, especially when certain options are not available in their area.

Home funeral guides: trained individuals who educate and empower families to exercise the innate right of caring for their own dead. A *home funeral guide* may provide education and support either prior to or during the funeral period.

Green funeral: A general term used to describe post-death care, from death to disposition, using only natural means (nontoxic preservation techniques and organic materials with minimal carbon footprint) that might include the funeral and disposition combined; sometimes confused with the terms “home funeral,” “green burial,” or “home burial.”

So now you’re an expert. And as a professional, you’ll be looked to for accurate information from a better-than-average-informed public. Who better to spread the message than you, the one on the front line when families are looking for understanding and compassion—and the facts?

