

## 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 though 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 though 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 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 all have 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 reserving the honor of 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?

When did we as a society determine that every Tom, Dick, and Harriet deserved permanent recognition and presence simply for having resided on the 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.

After all, 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 interring 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 everyone 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 left.

Initiatives such as green burial, where space can be used and reused in perpetuity, encouraging human activity above ground, sustaining community and family and the land, does not preclude the recognition of us as individuals worthy of honoring.

Human composting, where 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 our place in the scheme of things in perspective.

While this may seem threatening to many, it only takes 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.