Green Burial at a Crossroads

No concept associated with deathcare has created more of a buzz than green burial. But whether the concept matures into something that better serves the needs of families, the planet and the industry itself or devolves into a disposable marketing gimmick is anyone’s bet.

Growing numbers of funeral establishments – 250 to date – have joined the Green Burial Council network of approved providers; a nonprofit organization working to bring about more environmentally sustainable deathcare and the use of burial as a means of protecting natural areas. By encouraging the use of GBC-sanctioned protocols, facilities and products, as well as by participating in new educational training the council will soon be making available to its members, these firms are helping to ensure that the legitimate public benefits associated with green burial are protected, as are the reasons why it provides intrinsic value for so many.

The people who make up this part of the industry understand the good will families who’ve been staying away in recent years. And for the most part, they get that green burial will be rendered worthless for any purpose if it’s not stewarded with great care.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who are actively trying to diminish the idea out of existence, as was unsuccessfully attempted with cremation a few decades ago. Others feel they don’t need to care about “the green thing” since they regard concern over matters like climate change and toxification as a passing fad. A number claim to be adopting a wait-and-see approach, assuming that when and if the market for green burial more fully emerges, they’ll have no difficulty jumping on the bandwagon down the road. Some have begun offering diluted versions of eco-friendly practices and products colored with their very own shade of green.

What’s All the Fuss?

Funeral directors continue to ask me, “What’s all the fuss about green burial, anyway?” I understand what they mean. Shouldn’t any funeral home be willing to care for a decedent without the use of toxic chemicals if that’s what a family wants? Shouldn’t any funeral home offer a casket that functions more like a basket if that’s what a family wants? Shouldn’t any funeral home offer a casket that functions more like a basket if that’s what a family wants? Shouldn’t any funeral home offer a casket that functions more like a basket if that’s what a family wants?

It’s true that good establishments have always given families what they want, but it’s also the case that most funeral homes have been unwilling or unable to provide environmentally low-impact options. For anyone who thinks otherwise, the proof lies in the confused minds of the American public – the vast majority of whom still believe that embalming is legally required for a funeral. Few in this field seem to appreciate the damage this has caused and the extent to which it’s driving people away.

I learned of this phenomenon earlier this year when my mother died at age 88. A very traditional, Italian-Catholic woman, as recently as 15 years ago my mom had planned on going along with...
the kind of funeral she thought she was supposed to have, which included embalming and a lengthy visitation period. As cremation became increasingly legitimized in her mind, she began viewing it as her ticket out of an end-of-life ritual she didn’t really want. For my mom, any solace that might be provided to us via a “memory picture” was trumped by her desire to not have people “staring up my nose,” as she used to say. In the end, she was increasingly adamant about wanting to be cremated without having a funeral.

Green burial represents not only a way to accommodate those who wish to live, and die, with a lighter hand on the land, but it’s a vehicle to reconnect with people like my mother who’ve become disenchanted by what they perceive as their very limited choices. Many appear poised to embrace this concept, even if it’s not yet in their consciousness, as evidenced by a 2007 AARP study, which found that 21 percent of Americans age 50 and over had a preference for eco-friendly deathcare, even though only 19 percent had ever heard of the idea.

Prevailing wisdom among some in the industry is that green burial, by its very existence, diminishes funeral service. I’ve come to learn that’s hardly the case. In fact, green burial makes consumers feel better about it; or at least the part of the field now affiliated with the Green Burial Council. That’s because consumers seem inclined to suspend skepticism when dealing with companies they feel are trying to wed profit with purpose. They tend to believe that there’s a bigger story to which these firms are connected. And there is.

**Putting a Fence Around Green Burial**

Nowadays anyone can define anything as natural, environmentally sensitive, super-duper sustainable, etc. And when the whole world looks green, nothing necessarily is. Making matters worse, there’s little oversight in this new area of commerce, and I for one can’t see how our green economy” is going to emerge when there’s not yet a green currency we can all count on.

What the GBC has been trying to provide is a form of stopgap governance by setting forth the first set of certifiable standards for eco-friendly funeral service. We’re far from perfect, nor are we engaged in an exact science, but we’re continuing to evolve an idea at the never-before-crossed intersection of deathcare and environmentalism in a reasonable and credible manner with guidance from leading-edge practitioners, manufacturers, conservationists and change agents. And not only is the council’s work as trust provider protecting green burial, it’s also reducing risk for those who offer it.

If the GBC lends its seal of approval to a product, there’s a material safety data sheet on file proving it’s not made with hazardous substances. If a cremation disposition program is council certified, it can be counted on to legitimately contribute to the protection and/or creation of natural habitat. And if a GBC-approved cemetery makes ecological and aesthetic promises today, they’ll have to be upheld tomorrow, no
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matter who may own the facility.

Outside of our network, there are shades of green burial being offered, with some a bit shadier than others. This includes “green” caskets manufactured from material harvested in a manner that may destroy marine habitat; “green” embalming fluid composed of chemicals that are neither nontoxic nor biodegradable; as well as “green” cemetery operators promising to protect their land as natural areas despite the lack of any legally enforceable mechanism to back up such representations.

A vault company recently began reaching out to funeral directors who may be thinking green by reminding them that their product is composed of materials taken right from the earth. Of course, the company chose not to mention anything about the enormous carbon footprint associated with the mining, manufacturing and transporting of the 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete buried each year in the United States because of burial vaults.

A similar sort of greenwashing was just brought to my attention by a journalist who had read that the “green” spokesperson of a funeral trade association claimed that formaldehyde-based embalming was just “another shade of green.”

For the record, providing families with different shades of green funeral practices and products, and avoiding categorizing any as “good, better or best,” is a concept I began advocating a couple of years ago in presentations to funeral directors throughout the country. I’ve been suggesting that rather than diminishing any aspect of deathcare, we ought to focus instead on providing a range of greener options. And I continue to feel we should allow consumers to choose the shade of green that seems most appropriate to them while ensuring they can distinguish one shade from another.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine this concept would be so badly bastardized. And you can probably guess how trying to pass off the use of a carcinogen as eco-friendly might go over with the press.

“What’s up next then, green cancer?” the reporter chuckled.

After sharing a laugh, it dawned on me what a crying shame it would be if green burial were to be greenwashed down the drain by the very people who have so much to gain by making it actually mean something.

Conclusion

The Green Burial Council has been calling people forth in a fragmented industry with a positive and inclusive vision. We’ve been shining a light on decent folks in the field who are committed to moving it in a new direction. And we’ve been trying to cultivate leaders who will defend green burial against those who would sell it out for short-term gain. Whether enough rise up to meet the challenge of aligning deathcare with our nation’s pressing ecological and social needs remains to be seen.

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