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A movement for green life after death

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Americans bury the equivalent of the Golden Gate Bridge every year in placing loved ones in cemeteries.

Yes, that's right, more than 90,000 tons of metal and 1.6 million tons of concrete -- more asphalt and steel than in the San Francisco icon -- is used in burials in the U.S. each year.

One of the unexpected consequences of a growing population and the aging of the baby boom generation just might be an environmental crisis and change in the ways Americans bury our dead, according to Joe Sehee, the founder of the Green Burial Council and a keynote speaker at the largest national convention of funeral home directors, held in Chicago in October.

"There is no good reason to waste so many resources," Sehee said on Tuesday. "You look around the world and see the cycle of life includes birth, death, decay and regeneration, and we want to be a part of that."

Sehee, a former funeral company consultant, decries the environmental damage caused by the industrial burial of so much metal and the potential contamination from the 800,000 gallons of formaldehyde-based embalming fluids used each year, but says that his primary motivation is in helping people create end-of-life ceremonies that resonate with our culture.

"What really interests me is how Americans are reinventing rituals," he said. "I know how cathartic it can be to have these ceremonies connect with people."

Americans may be reinventing end-of-life rituals, but the number able to have truly "green" burials is still small.

The Green Burial Council only recognizes four exclusively green cemeteries in the United States so far, with none in the Chicago area.

Sehee says up to 40 funeral homes will be certified green when the council launches its certification program next year.

A green cemetery would not only eschew the concrete vault, exchanging them for biodegradable shrouds and coffins, but would refuse to embalm bodies and use natural grave markers, such as trees and shrubs, rather than heavy stone and marble.

But going green can mean more than avoiding environmentally hazardous chemicals.

"The idea is to be proactive, so your last gesture is to leave the world a better place," explains Bill Jordan, the director of the DePaul University Institute for Nature and Culture.

Green cemeteries don't use artificial irrigation or unnecessary landfill, Jordan says, but can act to restore vanishing ecology.

In the Chicago area, that means prairie land.

"This is more important" than recycling or buying green, Jordan explained, "because it is also ritually significant.

We're not going to restore the prairie by burying people, but this ritual can really put the ghosts back in the prairie and give it power," he said. "The land becomes once again connected to your family and sparks a real responsibility."

Jordan considered cremation to save the space on earth his burial would cost, an alternative taken by as many as 40 percent of Americans, but learned that the cremation and the fuel used in the process emit significant carbon dioxide and mercury.

"Now that doesn't appeal to me," he said. "It seems like a final gesture to pollute the environment with your body."

Jordan suggests that aging baby boomers are responsible for the overall greening of our society and that their aging might drive increased interest in green burials.

John Bucci, a funeral director based near Madison, Wis., seems agrees. "In 2005 and 2006 I didn't do any green burials," he said, "but this year I've done three already."

Bucci, who has directed Wisconsin Chapels for 10 years after retiring from a career in telecommunications, says he feels good about providing options that fit the needs of his customers.

"I'm a baby boomer," he said, "and I believe we are the ones driving this trend. We resisted being told what's right based on what's traditional. Baby boomers live the way we feel is right, and we want to die that way too."

The decline of traditional burial practices, at least amongst Catholics, is precisely what worries the Archdiocese, according to Roman Szabelski, executive director of Catholic Cemeteries for the Chicago Archdiocese.

"We see more people choosing not to take part in the full Catholic rites," he said, describing the sanctity of funeral mass, wakes, and

burials. "People are bypassing rituals to pray for the dead," he said, a symptom of a disposable culture that wants everything to move faster.

Szabelski said that none of the Catholic cemeteries or parishes has received any requests for a green funeral, but that the archdiocese has no spiritual reservations about the practice. "It's important to pray for the dead and to respect the rituals of faith," he said, "but there is no problem integrating environmentally friendly burials with Catholicism."

In fact, many traditional religious rites seem practically designed to encourage environmentally friendly end of life ceremonies.

Muslims, for example, resist embalming whenever possible, and often choose to be buried quickly and without great fanfare.

"We get started as soon as possible" after a death, explained Shakeel Shafiuedin of Muslim Funeral Service, Chicago's leading Muslim funeral provider. "We wash the body with soap and water and prepare it in a simple white shroud of three pieces," he said.

"After short prayers in a Mosque we bury the body in a simple soft cloth casket." There is no all-Muslim cemetery in the Chicago area, according to Shafiuedin, but the funeral directors work with Mosques to buy sets of plots in which Muslims can be buried together, facing Mecca.

"We would prefer to bury the dead without the concrete vaults, the way we would do it in other countries" he added, "but so far we haven't had much luck. Only one or two cemeteries seem open to the idea."

"The funeral shouldn't be too costly either," he added.

"We believe the person was known in life but is already gone – we should not burden the living community with expensive services and upkeep the death."

There are not enough green burials in the area to fully assess whether green burials would be less expensive, according to Bucci, the Wisconsin funeral director, but avoiding fancy permanent caskets for a simpler approach can potentially cut tens of thousands of dollars off the cost of a funeral, he said.

This ethic of simplicity is mirrored in other communities of faith as well.

Orthodox Jews must not be embalmed, and are buried in simple caskets that have no metal at all, according to the Chicago Rabbinical Society. In Israel, the orthodox are buried in simple shrouds with no casket at all, according to the council.

Closer to home, monks at the New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa, craft simple biodegradable caskets as part of their vocation to God and their aesthetic of simplicity.

"The same uncomplicated and reverent regard for the beauty of God's created world is reflected in the way Trappist monks approach death," according to the Abbey.

"For Trappists, there is beauty in death because it is treated as a natural part of life – that is why Trappists do not try to hide what happens to the body at death or interfere with the natural process of returning it to the earth. It is the final step along a path they have been following all along – the path to God."

The monks are also determined to make their sustaining Internet business – www.TrappistCaskets.com – more sustainable. For every casket purchased, the monks plant a tree in living memory of the deceased. They hope one day to harvest the trees they plant for caskets and thus begin the cycle anew.



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