

A photograph of Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council, sitting on a rocky ledge in front of a large, textured rock formation. He is wearing a patterned button-down shirt and dark pants. The background shows some trees and a bright sky.

joe sehee

executive director, Green Burial Council

interview by Zane Fieber

photograph by Aaron Sautz

Joe Sehee explains how green burial isn't just good for the economy and the planet—it's what Jesus would want you to do

What is green burial? And why should we believe it's really green and not just a catchphrase?

There is a lot of so-called green-washing going on in many industries, including burial. To clarify, green or natural burial basically means burial without the use of toxins or materials that are not biodegradable, and with the use of a marker that is either living or ecologically functional. It's essentially the way we've buried for thousands of years, but it really had a renaissance (pardon the pun) about a dozen years ago in England.

Is there a need to change burial because we've been using too much space and too many resources?

Yes, in part. We bury way too much concrete, metal, copper, wood, and embalming fluid with formaldehyde, and only recently have we thought about how much stuff we're putting in the ground. At the Green Burial Council, we're trying to look at burial as a way to consecrate a landscape and therefore conserve land and open space, so we're advocating low-density burial done in an ecologically sound way with the participation of an established conservation partner. It's very different from the way the conventional industry operates, which is to shove as many bodies in the ground as possible, not worry about what gets buried with them, and put a fence around it all. Aren't there health reasons for the manner in which we currently bury people?

No, it has nothing to do with health. It has a lot to do with Americans being reluctant to get in sync with the cycle

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that is happening all around us: being born and living and dying and decaying and regenerating. The conventional way of doing death in America is that we try to protect the body—from what, I'm not sure—through chemicals, concrete vaults, bulletproof caskets. It's a function of the way we deny death. Green burial allows people to befriend death a bit to understand the organic sense of it. Many people will argue that embalming is necessary to protect people from airborne pathogens, but unless a corpse learns to cough, that's never going to be a problem.

So the usual way of burying people is a racket, a cash-cow—or cash-corpse—game?

Let me be clear that there are many wonderful and ethical people in the industry, but there are some who will tell grieving families anything in order to sell them something. Take a vault for example—it serves no special purpose, but it's a thousand bucks that can be added to the burial ticket. Embalming fluids, paint and heavy metals all drain into the ground and water table in concentrated doses from vaults. Some cemeteries say simple shrouds are not allowed—the basic muslin cloth that has been used for thousands of years.

If a shroud isn't enough, then what would Jesus do?

Exactly. No one needs anything more than Jesus did.

In fact we're finding that green burial has a strong appeal to religious traditionalists—as well as outdoor enthusiasts, cost-conscious consumers, and a lot of other people who perceive waste, greed, or pollution in the current practice. This is an industry that ought to have lower profit margins because it is dealing with grieving and dying, but it's exactly the opposite. You're sponsoring the idea of a local burial and land-conservation partnership.

In Santa Fe, I'm working with Commonweal Conservancy, which is the first conservation entity in the U.S. to embrace this idea. We're developing a 10-acre burial ground within the Galisteo Basin Preserve as a means to protect 1,000 acres, and strategizing on an adjacent 5,000 acres. If a whole-body burial is \$4,000, half of that cost is a tax-deductible contribution to the conservancy and half goes into the upkeep of the cemetery. People with the financial means might leave a legacy of 500 acres of open space. The success of green burial as an industry will be determined by consumer choice—you can be on a cold slab and have a bunch of chemicals injected into you, or you can be returned to earth, help replenish some wildflowers, and keep a beautiful landscape. Death in that context is not creepy and odd, it's inevitable and something we all want to make peace with. For more on the Green Burial Council, visit www.greenburialcouncil.org. ■