

“Bury Me Green”

**a sermon
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

**Sunday, Oct. 27, 2013
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio**

Let me begin my reflection this morning by acknowledging that the subject matter I am going to be considering today is both unique, and potentially unsettling. I will be talking – and fairly frankly at that – about my own death. By extension then, I will be talking about *your* death – perhaps one of the most taboo things I can do, certainly one of the most taboo topics in our culture. Sure, there are preachers in some religious traditions that focus their message on the afterlife – and who thus frequently allude to your death (often in an attempt to frighten you into behaving a certain way), but that’s not what I will be doing today. Or any other Sunday, ever, I promise you.

No, instead I respect your – as we might say in Unitarian Universalism – individual search for truth and meaning. Your own religious path, and the understandings that might lead you to. I recognize that each person has his or her own very personal and intimate relationship with death. As human beings, we each have unique, individual experiences with, and of, death – as well as our own, often quite different, ways of dealing with, and *living* with, that very human awareness of our own mortality.

Death, in other words, is inextricably woven into the fabric of life. It is as common and commonplace a part of the human journey as anything can be. Yet we in America today have grown up, and live in a society – a culture – that has done its best to put death out of sight, out of mind. Of course, the irony is that we cannot, ultimately, ignore death. We cannot shut ourselves off from it, or compartmentalize it, despite our many and varied efforts to do so.

So this morning, let’s *talk* about death. Honestly. Candidly. Let’s reflect on it and consider it – with awareness and with intention. Today, I will be sharing a bit of my own journey with death, with the natural world, and with *natural* death and burial – in the first of a two-part worship series. Next week, we will mourn, and remember, in community, those whom we have lost to death in the past year, during our annual All Souls Sunday worship service. You are asked to share with

me the name and relationship of any loved one whom you wish to have memorialized – and you are invited to bring a picture of that person with you to church next Sunday, to place on one of several altars we will have set up for that purpose.

For today, however, let us focus not on someone else's death – but on our own. As I say, this is perhaps the most taboo of all topics in American society. Over the past century or so, we (almost alone, among the human societies of the world) have embarked on a sad and, I would argue, distinctly *ineffective* cultural attempt to distance ourselves from death. We have created separate spaces, areas apart from where we live our daily lives, for burying the dead. Often these isolated but nonetheless beautifully manicured and maintained cemeteries are even hidden behind large, fancy gates.

They are places where *someone else* must deal with the unpleasantness of death – deal with it, for us. We have created funeral homes, and funeral directors – a full-fledged funeral *industry* – which, like many of our other Western industries, is designed primarily, it seems, to *hire out*, to someone else, (and thus inoculate us from) the more unpleasant aspects of our human existence. Whether it be the manufacture of cheap consumer goods, the extraction of fossil fuels from the earth, the treatment of waste, the treatment of illness, or finally the handling and disposition of our departed loved ones – we prefer to keep our *own* hands clean, and to keep it all, as much as possible, out of sight – and thus, at least we hope, out of mind.

Our obsession with separating ourselves from the natural cycle is perhaps most evident in the lengths to which we in modern go America to prevent our bodies from ever fully returning to the earth. Consider, for a moment (though I know it is frowned upon, in our culture, for you to consider these things – and the local funeral director certainly doesn't want you to consider these things) – consider, for a moment, the most common funeral practices in our society today.

We routinely *embalm* the body of dead person – an ultimately futile attempt to keep it intact forever. There are many myths and misconceptions about embalming, of course. Perhaps you didn't know that embalming is not legally required. Were you aware that Judaism, and Islam, and frankly most every religion in the world *except* Christianity, frowns on the practice of embalming, considering it a desecration of the deceased? Did you know that the United States is one of very, very few countries in the world where this practice is commonplace? That prior to the Civil War, it was almost unheard of?

Were you aware that embalming is *utterly unnecessary*, despite what a funeral home may tell you, for disease prevention or sanitation? (Remember, it is a profit-making venture for them). Were you aware that, in fact, some of the chemicals in the most widely used embalming fluids are known carcinogens, and

are bad for both the environment, and for the morticians themselves who routinely use them?

And that's just the preparation of the American body for burial. Once the body is embalmed, it is dressed – in nice clothes, even with nice *shoes* – then placed in a coffin lined with satin, lace, and other padding. The coffin itself is often made of stainless steel, copper or other metals, and then hermetically sealed. As if that weren't enough, it is then lowered into a *sealed*, concrete vault – underground, yes – but not really in the ground.

And there's another side to this decidedly *unnatural* way we routinely bury our dead in America. Each year, in cemeteries in the United States, we put into the earth more than 100,000 tons of steel, more than one and a half million tons of concrete, 30 million board-feet of treated lumber, and more than 800,000 gallons of toxic embalming fluid. In short, the environmental impact of modern American funeral practices is staggering – particularly when you remember that this kind of thing takes place almost nowhere else on earth, and that it never really even took place here, until the last century or so.

No, the truth is, up until the last two or three generations, people in America honored their deceased family members by caring for their bodies, *themselves*, in their homes – as loved ones visited and paid their final respects, and as the body was prepared for burial. In those days, one's grandfather might have been buried in the woods – *on his own property* – right where he lived and worked, each and every day. Right where his descendants live and work, every day.

Or perhaps he would have been buried right outside the *church*, where his family would gather each week for worship. Where they could remember him, pay their respects regularly, and maintain something of a relationship, a conversation if you will, with him. Again, remember: most of the people in the world still live – and die – this way.

I submit to you this morning that most other cultures have a much *healthier* understanding of death, than our supposedly advanced, American culture. Certainly healthier than the one I was raised with.

For you see, all of my earliest memories, involve death. Next month will be the 50th anniversary of the very first memory I have: the assassination of the President. When John F. Kennedy was killed, it changed *everything* in my world. My distraught teacher sent me home from school, with my distraught parents, and we watched everything – everything, about it – together, on television, along with an equally distraught nation. Death, and burial, were seemingly everywhere. The somber, horse-drawn carriage; the black veil over Jacqueline Kennedy's face – these images had a profound effect on me. I was little John John, holding his mother's hand, saluting – silent witness, as his father was being buried, not fully understanding what was going on.

Then there was the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald, a couple of days later. Within a month or so, one of my uncles died. I knew the adults were upset, acting strangely – but I was not allowed to see his body, or go to the funeral.

Then, sometime not long after, I remember cowering in the corner, in my parents' bedroom, crying – terrified. My mother found me there, and asked me what I was upset about. After some coaxing, I confessed to her that I . . . was afraid of dying.

Clearly flustered and ill-at-ease, my mother – God bless her, as we say down South – stammered something along the lines of “that’s not something you need to worry about for a long time.” Then she quickly changed the subject, hoping I would forget about it.

Of course, I didn’t.

How can *any* of us forget that we are going to die? It’s part of *who we are*, as human beings. Yes, we go great pains to try to forget about it. Humanity has created countless ways to do so, most of them decidedly unhealthy – both for us, and for those around us. But our mortality is always there. It took me decades to reach the point where I can stand here today and talk openly about my own death. And it is no small source of ongoing amusement to me – perfect irony; a cosmic joke, I am sometimes inclined to believe – that from a youngster whose two greatest fears were of death, and of public speaking, I somehow became – in midlife – a minister!

Yet . . . that is what happened. And so it was that, after many years of ministry that included sitting with the dying, pastoring the grieving, and conducting funerals and memorial services of all kinds – I took my first sabbatical – during which I began to give serious thought, once again – this time, as a mature adult – to my *own* death. To how *I* wanted, to die, and to how I wanted my body to be . . . well, there’s no better way to put it – disposed of, when I do die.

Despite the fact that I am and always will be a detail-oriented plan-maker – like the vast majority of us, I had long postponed dealing with this last, *particular* detail. I had procrastinated until I was 50 years old, in fact, on that little matter which is, again ironically, in the funeral business at least, called “pre-planning.” Heck, I’m the guy who loves pre-planning things! Just . . . not *this* thing.

Somewhere along the way, I had developed the vague notion that I wanted to be cremated – but the truth is, this was largely a default, because of what I didn’t want to happen: *At all costs*, I wanted to avoid ending up with a conventional burial, in a conventional cemetery – for all the reasons that I described a moment ago. And so cremation, at least, seemed like a less unpleasant alternative – and I didn’t really know that there were other alternatives.

But then, five years ago, while on sabbatical, I learned about a different kind of burial – a new, though literally ancient alternative to conventional burial (and to

cremation). This “discovery” of mine changed not only my pre-planning, but also my very *relationship* with death. With my own death. I am talking now about a back-to-nature movement known as “natural burial.” During that sabbatical, I researched the possibilities, and the philosophy behind natural burial, and even visited and explored some natural burial sites.

As part of this journey of discovery, one beautiful fall afternoon, not unlike today, I found myself walking the very path that you see, on the cover of your program – deep into the woods at a place called Ramsey Creek Preserve. What I found there was one of the most peaceful, most moving, most *sacred* places I have ever been.

Ramsey Creek Preserve is composed of 33 acres (soon to be more than doubled to 70 acres) of wilderness, in the mountains near the South Carolina-North Carolina border. The Preserve is protected by a conservation land trust, which legally ensures it will always remain as pristine as it is today – that it will never be developed, but instead will remain in its *natural* state. And here’s the kicker: You can be buried there!

While hiking in the woods at Ramsey Creek, I tell you – a natural cemetery, a cemetery unlike any you have ever seen – my fears and uncertainty about my own death simply *dissolved*; I could almost feel them, draining out of me. I was at peace. At home. And I knew, instinctively – *this* is how I want to be buried: Bury me green.

Along the trail, and off, into the woods, there were small, very tasteful stone or wood markers – you can’t see them, in the picture, but they’re there – each one made of all-natural materials, indicating the final resting place of someone’s loved one – of a fellow human traveler – of a person whom I did not know, but with whom I nonetheless share so much in common.

Here stood a weathered, hundred-year-old tree; there, some bright green ferns or moss. Flowers – *wild* flowers, natural flowers, not the store-bought kind or the plastic, “perpetual” kind you find in lifeless, antiseptic cemeteries – *flowers*, were growing in every direction, as far as the eye could see, in various states of bloom or decay. And speaking of “as far as the eye can see” – there were no cars, no power lines, no buildings, no concrete – in fact, no other living human being. The only sounds that reached my ears were those of birds and bugs, and the occasional scampering of a squirrel.

My afternoon at Ramsey Creek was like that of Meg Barnhouse, who wrote in this morning’s first reading, “For one spring after another, my body [will] be part of” the woods – when, as she so tenderly put it, “my life [will then be] flowing through the cells of a leaf ... opening to the warmth, and the light” – comforted in “the certainty of remaining *part* of Life.”

American documentary filmmaker Sarah Thomas, whose latest movie is titled “Earth to Earth: Natural Burial and the Church of England,” blogged excitedly about her own first encounter with a natural burial ground in Great Britain: “It is ... a burial site, and yet [it is] one of the most *alive* places I have ever experienced... Far from being morbid ... what struck me most is the sense that those laid to rest just *become part* of what is there – literally, and visually. For me,” she continues – and I would agree with her – “this translates more accurately what death *is* – part of a continuum, rather than a finite ending. The graves are dug the day of the burial, [by hand], and filled in immediately afterward. The bereaved can then scatter wildflower seeds and lay a small wooden plaque, flush to the ground, which eventually will also decompose... [It is] a resting place that *feels right*.”

Such a resting place feels right for Sarah Thomas, for Meg Barnhouse – and it feels right *for me*. I realize this is my decision – it is not the direction everyone would choose for themselves – but for the first time ever, in my personal relationship with death, everything feels – well – *right*.

Let me share with you just a little bit more, about what is commonly referred to as “green burial.” The natural burial movement is just beginning to develop here in America. Ramsey Creek Preserve, which again is pictured on your bulletin, was the first burial ground to use land trusts, and legal protocols like conservation contracts, to not only protect the land where people are buried, but to fund the conservation and protection of a full-blown nature preserve, by using the relatively modest fees paid by families for the privilege of burial there to create a non-profit organization to steward the land and all that lives there.

In short, it’s a win-win situation – especially from an environmental, Seventh Principle standpoint. Other natural burial sites have followed the Ramsey Creek model to create nature preserves, where human beings may be naturally buried. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Recently, some conventional cemeteries have also adopted the idea, shifting their practices to become “hybrid” cemeteries by setting aside portions of their property for eco-friendly, sustainable burial sites – a practice that is certified through the Green Burial Council, which was created by a group of environmentalists that included the founders of Ramsey Creek. In a “green burial,” there are no vaults, no metals or toxic chemicals, nothing that is not biodegradable and 100 percent natural – which, after all, is what the human body itself is.

Twenty-four states now have at least one burial ground that is sanctioned and certified by the Green Burial Council. In Ohio, there is the lovely Foxfield Preserve at the Wilderness Center between Wooster and Canton. There are also a couple of “hybrid” cemeteries elsewhere in the state, as well as one in Indianapolis. Sadly, there are not yet any green burial locations in Kentucky – though there, like

most states (including Ohio) it is perfectly legal to be buried on your own property, provided the proper paperwork has been filed and certain easements and zoning restrictions are met. I bet you didn't know there's a good chance, depending on where you live, that you could designate your land as a "family cemetery."

Just another of the well-kept secrets the funeral industry would prefer you not to know.

Before I close today, let me tell you about the two small objects that are up here on the altar this morning. These are two pieces of nature that have such special significance for me that I keep them on my *own* altar at home, in our meditation room, and reflect on them nearly every day. The first is a pine cone, and the second is a tiny berry – maybe Connie Booth can help me identify it later.

The cone is from a pine tree that, literally, now grows out of the grave of Henry David Thoreau, in Concord, Massachusetts. I picked it up off the ground the very first time I first visited Thoreau's grave, while leading a Unitarian Universalist youth "pilgrimage" there in the early 1990's.

I remember the moment well: When I realized that a *tree* was actually growing out of Thoreau's grave – that *his* life was now flowing through those pine needles – when I pondered the perfect symmetry of that fact, and the natural *beauty* of it all – there, at Thoreau's simple grave, covered with pine cones, tree roots and rocks – a seed was planted in *my* heart. A seed that blossomed many years later, at Ramsey Creek, when I knew for sure that I want to *return to the earth*, in a manner very different from the one our society currently prescribes.

I found the berry that is here on the altar today, lying on the grass underneath a tree that is growing out of the grave of John Murray – at Murray Grove in New Jersey, where I visited just last month. By that time, I was already a full-fledged convert to natural, green burial – making the symbolism at Murray's grave even more significant for me.

Thoreau and Murray – Unitarian and Universalist, respectively – shapers of our UU faith; influencers of *my* theology, my way of looking at life, the world, and the Divine. Each, buried centuries ago in the kinds of cemeteries traditional for their time – now has a *tree* growing out of his grave – the very elements of his body still living, in new and beautiful ways.

If we must die – and die, we must – I can think of no better way to end up. Wendell Berry, the great Kentucky poet of nature, writes, "The ground's a grave – and so it thrives. A thousand thousand years will bloom here in the spring. Upon the living, sing the blessings of the dead."

May my death, when that time comes, confer its own blessing on the living, and on Life itself. May my earthly body return to the earth, as it was meant to do – its elements continuing to be part of the greater Life of this planet, just as I believe my spiritual essence will become part of the greater Spirit of Life in this Universe.

When my time comes – please, bury me green.
May it be so – and Amen.