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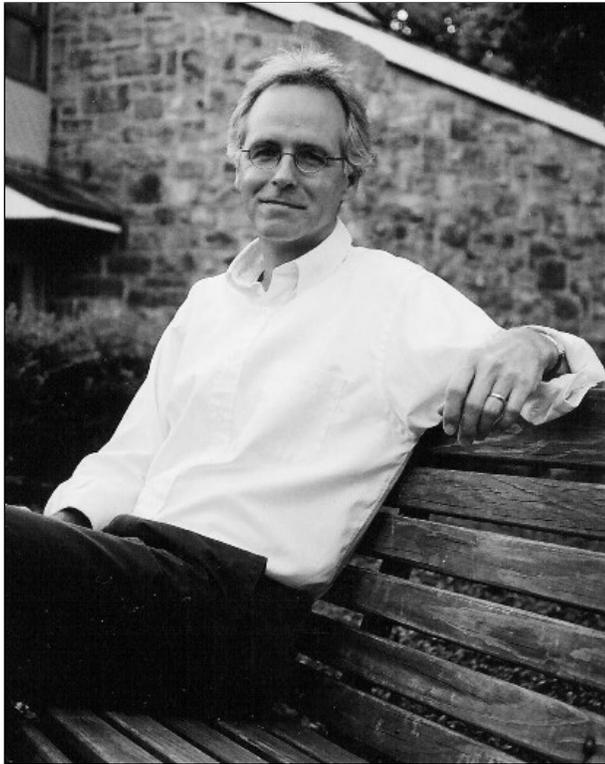
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Mark Harris Discusses A "Natural Way of Burial"



Jim Hauser

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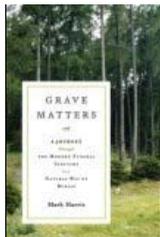
Mark Harris is a former environmental columnist with the Los Angeles Times Syndicate. His new book is entitled [Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial](#).



So not only do we have to worry about the effects of our daily activities on the environment, but according to your book



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we should also be thinking about the damage we inflict after our death. Walk us through the traditional funeral and burial process, and the ecological harm it causes.

In the typical modern burial, the body is pumped full of toxic embalming chemicals, sealed inside a metal casket that's entombed within a concrete bunker and then covered over with a ton of dirt and grass kept preternaturally green with pest and weed killer. Above ground, the local cemetery may look bucolic and natural; below the surface, it serves as a de facto landfill of hazardous wastes and non-biodegradable materials.

Some million-and-a-half Americans are given this standard, funeral home send-off every year. Outfitting each of them demands the extraction and consumption of vast amounts of resources and leaves a trail of environmental damage in its wake.

Over time, for example, a ten-acre swatch of cemetery ground will contain enough coffin wood to construct more than 40 homes, nearly a thousand tons of casket steel and another twenty thousand tons of concrete for vaults. Joe Sehee, director of the non-profit [Green Burial Council](#), has crunched numbers to show that enough metal is diverted into coffin and vault production to make the Golden Gate Bridge every year, and enough concrete to build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit. All this to simply lay our dead to rest.

Formaldehyde, the primary ingredient in embalming fluids and a potential carcinogen, is another concern. We bury a million gallons of the stuff every year, some of which eventually leaches from embalmed remains and runs into surrounding soil and groundwaters. Not enough research has been done to make definitive judgments about formaldehyde's effect on the environment; its effect on members of the mortuary trade is clearer. Numerous studies have shown that embalmers and funeral directors exhibit a higher incidence of leukemia and cancers of the brain and colon, among other ailments.

So what are the alternatives? What are people doing to make burials more environmentally friendly?

The families I interviewed for the book pursued natural alternatives that went light on funeral goods; embalming was always avoided, burial vaults used only when mandated by the cemetery. The goods that families did use were generally of simple make, readily biodegradable, and often handcrafted. The primary goal here -- so at odds with modern burial, with its preservation of the corpse at literally all costs -- was to allow and even invite the decay of one's physical body and return what remained to the elements it sprang from, as directly as simply as possible. To return dust to dust.

In some cases, that meant returning to old tradition. One man I profiled buried his wife in a private graveyard inside a wooded clearing at the base of his mountain home, her body wrapped in a shroud. Another woman scattered her husband's cremated remains at sea, off the coast of San Diego. I found families that hired local carpenters to craft plain, wooden coffins for their dead, others that "waked" and held funerals for their loved ones at home.

A couple of families chose more novel, natural returns. In Sarasota, Florida, I watched one widow mix the cremated remains of her husband into the concrete slurry that formed an igloo-shaped "reef ball." A month later, she boarded a boat on the New Jersey coast and watched the crew drop her husband's reef ball onto an artificial reef a couple of miles offshore, to serve as habitat for fish.

The "natural cemeteries" springing up in this country offer burial in rural, usually wooded settings. Embalming, vaults, and non-biodegradable caskets are banned; minimal headstones, which lay flush to the ground, are permitted, though trees, shrubs and indigenous vegetation may serve as well. There are half a dozen of these green graveyards in the U.S. -- the U.K. is home to some 200 -- with a score of others in the planning stages.

I count cremation as a natural alternative. Incinerating a body does consume natural gas and electricity and emits pollutants -- including, at times, mercury, from dental amalgams -- into the atmosphere. But it also demands significantly fewer resources than standard burial and allows for the return of the resulting ash to the natural environment.

I should mention that all these burials are legal.

Tibetan Buddhists will sometimes leave a dead body exposed to the elements as food for vultures. I imagine this might be a public health issue in the United States. Is there anything close to that tradition that's possible here?

The organization that operates the [Ethician Family Cemetery](#), a natural cemetery in Texas, says it has gained permission from the state to conduct "sky burials" on its grounds. To facilitate them, it will construct a Tower of Silence, a walled, circular structure that's open to the air. A corpse will be laid onto a platform in the center of the tower, to be degraded by the elements and consumed by birds of prey.

Followers of the ancient, largely Middle Eastern Zoroastrian religion practiced this form of sky burial for thousands of years. Contemporary Zoroastrians who live in Bombay still do. I believe certain Native American communities in this country continue to observe a similar, long-held tradition of laying out their dead on raised biers under an open sky. I don't see sky burials going mainstream in the U.S., though an organization called the Society for Ecological Sky Burial is working to promote them.

Preservation of the body seems to have become of less importance to people in recent years, while practices like cremation are more common. Why do you think that is?

We're focusing far less on the corpse than we used to, for one. The viewing of the body was an expected feature of the decent funeral in our parents' and grandparents' generations. Now, it's quite common and acceptable to hold closed-casket funerals or memorial services without the body present.

The Catholic Church's gradual if reluctant acceptance of cremation -- a form of disposition that literally de-emphasizes the body -- probably helped in that regard, giving Catholics at least permission to look beyond the mortal remains in memorializing a life. Jessica Mitford, for her part, encouraged Americans to question the funeral industry's contention that we must view an embalmed, cosmetized and life-like corpse in order to acknowledge that a death has indeed occurred and then get on with our grief. One man I interviewed for the book who honors his mother's wishes to be cremated with no viewing beforehand articulated Mitford's argument as succinctly as any when he said, "My mother thought that having people see her dead body laid out in a funeral home wasn't going to do her or anyone else any good."

I also think we're growing more reluctant to preserve the remains of our loved ones because we know a lot more about the preservative process itself. Thanks to funeral exposés and shows like CSI many of us have read about or seen a T.V. embalming -- and seen it for the invasive and gruesome process it is -- and are opting out. At the same time, funeral groups and the like are telling us that embalming is almost never required by law, doesn't preserve a body forever, and offers little benefit to the public health. So, why do it?

For now, anyway, cremation is proving the most popular alternative to the modern funeral. It's cheap, for starters (\$1,800 on average, versus up to \$10,000 for the standard send-off), sparing of land, and simple to arrange. I believe more of us will eventually turn to some of the other natural options I write about as people find out about them and when they become easier to access (i.e., when the number of natural cemeteries grows, as is happening).

Moving a loved one's ashes or body a long distance to achieve a "natural burial," whether at sea or in a "natural cemetery" strikes me as anything but environmentally friendly given the carbon emissions released just to transport the remains. Is this ever mentioned? If one does not have the land to pursue a backyard burial, what in your opinion would be the most environmentally sensitive method to dispose of one's remains?

I acknowledge in the book that the inherent "green-ness" of any one option depends on the given burial. If you're driving someone's ashes a thousand miles from home to scatter them in pristine forestland or air-freighting a body to a distant natural cemetery for shrouded interment there – as has happened – you're certainly negating much, if not, all, of the benefit to the environment you gained from choosing an earth-friendly funeral. That said, I don't want, nor do I think it's possible (or worthwhile), to create a litmus test for the "true green" burial. Families would do well, though, to consider the real environmental costs of their chosen natural alternative.

In large part, what's most eco-friendly for any one death hinges on local factors: the proximity of the nearest natural cemetery, whether the crematory boasts a filter to capture any mercury that's vaporized in the process of incinerating any body that harbors dental amalgams, the willingness of the local funeral home to hold an unembalmed body for a private family viewing.

All factors being equal, it's hard to imagine a greener send-off than the kind of woodland burial that's offered at [Ramsey Creek Preserve](#), a natural cemetery in South Carolina. Not only are the dead laid to rest in a green manner (with no embalming, vault or huge headstone) and in a green setting, but a portion of the burial costs are directed into an account that goes toward preserving the land and restoring it to ecological health. Talk about using a death to create a lasting legacy for the living.

Aside from the environmental issues, do you see ways that the funeral process can better serve the psychological and social needs of family and friends?

The funeral industry serves families best when it gives them what they want, at a reasonable cost, and without the pressure, subtly or not, to do otherwise.

That will necessarily require the industry to increase the offerings on its General Price List of Goods and Services. Any list should provide, for example, the option to refrigerate remains in lieu of embalming, and when possible to then allow for some kind of viewing. Instead of limiting the choice of an affordable casket to, say, the puke green, cloth-covered box that's relegated to the dark corner of the display room, funeral directors should offer a range of handsome, basic caskets at affordable prices.

We're seeing some of this happen already. More funeral directors are showing a willingness to literally step outside their parlor doors to offer personalized funerals in non-funereal settings. The one-size-fits-all funeral that has been the norm for the last hundred years really doesn't fit all, or even many of us, and that's truer now more than ever before.

March 5, 2007

Paul Comstock

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