

Environmentally Friendly Death and Funeral Choices

The principles of *reduce, reuse, and recycle* can be appropriately applied to death and funeral choices. Such eco-friendly options protect our national re-sources, with financial savings that will benefit your estate. A family pet, buried in the yard under the apple tree, has been given an eco-friendly funeral. Here are some suggestions for the rest of your family.

The Body of the Matter

At the present time, it is estimated that thirty percent of all medical expenditures occur in the last few years of a person's life, with questionable contribution to the quality of that life. A **Living Will** reduces the likelihood that medical resources will be spent needlessly when the time of death approaches.

Organ and tissue donation not only represent generous and caring gifts that improve the quality of life for the recipient, the recycling of body parts is likely to reduce the recipient's ultimate medical needs.

If one is not an organ donor, **body donation** for medical study is an alternative way to reuse the body. Many medical schools will pay for transporting the body within a limited area, and cost to your estate should be minimal. Medical study will necessitate the use of some chemicals for preservation, but an alternative—perhaps a plastic model—would, in the manufacturing process, add equal or greater pollutants to the environment while being far less satisfactory. Furthermore, scientific knowledge gained from medical re-

search will reduce the medical needs of subsequent generations.

In most cases, body donation can be considered a loan, and the remains or cremains will be returned to the family if the request is made at the time the body is delivered. Because a body for medical study should be delivered in a timely way, a **memorial service** without the casket present should be planned.

As a Matter of Fact

Embalming is not required in most circumstances. During the embalming process, it is likely that some of the toxic fluids will be released into the sewer system. Although OSHA has strict requirements—such as adequate ventilation—the health of funeral professionals is put at risk when repeatedly exposed to embalming fluids. Contamination from blood-borne pathogens is another concern for morticians. When funeral arrangements will be delayed, refrigeration is usually an option. Most hospitals have refrigerated morgue facilities.

Put the Matter to Rest

The body container that consumes the least of our resources and energy to produce is a **rice straw casket** or a **plain wooden box**. A significant shift back to the use of a simple coffin would also support local artisans and reduce long-distance trucking from out-of-state casket factories. Glue is used extensively in the manufacture of plywood and particle-board and, because the glue chemicals would be released in the cremation or decomposition process, caskets made from either are less desirable. Cardboard is usually made from recycled material, and a cardboard container would also be appropriate, especially for cremation.

When a funeral with the body present is planned, a velvet or other attractive cloth could be draped over the wooden or cardboard casket if a more formal presentation is preferred.

Of Little Matter

Cremation is a process that quickly reduces the body to its elements. The energy needed to accomplish the cremation process is balanced to some extent by the equipment and labor that otherwise would be needed for grave excavation, and it is considerably less than for the construction of an above-ground mausoleum. Modern cremation units operate with air-scrubbing capabilities to keep air pollution to a minimum.

When death occurs away from home, shipping cremated remains will be far less expensive than the cost for shipping a body.

An “immediate cremation” is usually the least expensive option on a mortuary price list. A **memorial service** without the body present reduces the involvement of funeral personnel and related expenses. A memorial service can be held at the convenience of family and friends at any meaningful or desirable location, usually without undue cost.

A Grave Matter

One pessimistic wag suggested that cemeteries may be the only green patches left in a few generations. Flying over densely developed cities, it's easy to see what he had in mind, although the rigid rows of monuments seem like an intrusion in the otherwise refreshing green space.

If body burial in a cemetery is a preference, encourage your church or town to plan a cemetery that also has facilities for other uses such as concerts or art exhibits. If memorial

markers are limited to modest ground-level ones, landscaping and floral plantings can create a pleasant park for continued enjoyment. Rather than land that is devoid of visitors except on Memorial Day or remembrance occasions, cemetery land can be shared with the living when it is functional and aesthetic.

When cemeteries require a grave liner or vault to eliminate settling, the five-piece slab assembly or concrete box would meet the requirement with the minimum expense in money and materials. There is no need to be concerned about a “sealer.” The natural process of decomposition will occur, regardless, and the open-bottom grave liner will efficiently facilitate a return of one's elements to the earth.

For those in rural areas, home burial can be considered in most states. Although there would be no guarantee of maintenance of the grave-sites in future years, the proximity of family for the present may be of sufficient benefit. For home burial, no grave liner or coffin vault would be needed, and, in some states, such land dedicated to cemetery use is tax-exempt.

Cremation is considered final disposition in almost all states, and the cost of a cemetery plot may be avoided. Less land and energy are required to inter cremated remains, and they could even be shared among those who care.

Popular “scattering gardens” in other states have maximized the potential for disposition of cremated remains in limited space. Many churches are now adding them to their grounds and offer this option at little or no cost to families.

Green Cemeteries

Since the first “green” cemetery (a burial ground that prohibits embalming, metal coffins, and vaults, and tries to keep the landscape natural) opened in the U.S. in 1998, interest in green burial has exploded. There are about 20 green cemeteries in the country today, with more planned. To find them, go to:

<http://naturalburial.coop/USA/>

A Matter of Life in Death

Some obituaries say “Please omit flowers.” Or “Donate to a charity of one's choice.” What will yours say? Will you be creative? By being specific, you have an opportunity to influence those gifts in ways that will matter the most to you and your values. Such suggestions are usually much more gratifying to the donor, knowing of your special interests:

- Living plants for the church yard or other worthy group
- Books on the environment [or whatever] for a library
- Donations to environmental groups such as—WorldWatch, The Environmental Defense Fund, Greenpeace, The Sierra Club, a state association of recyclers, a science museum. . . .
- A scholarship fund for ecological studies at . . .
- Support for medical studies and research at . . .

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