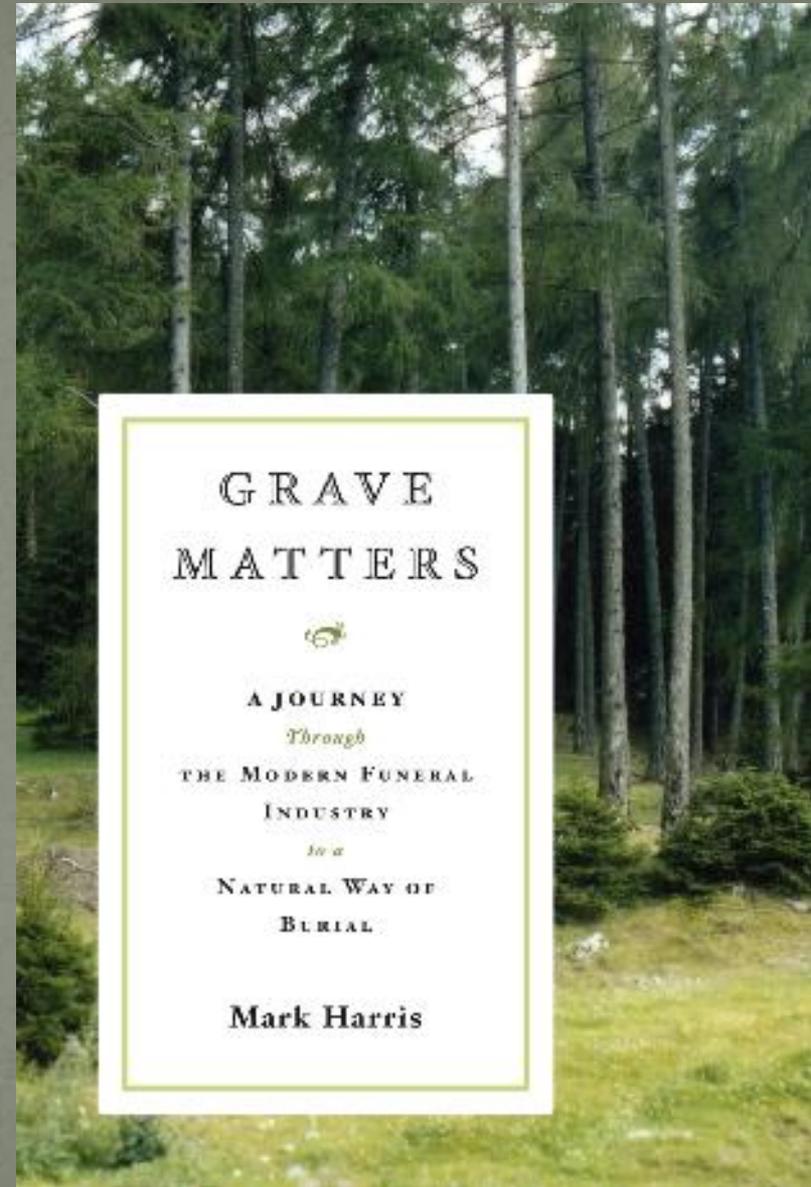


Green Burial

Frequently Asked Questions

- 1) What is a green burial?
- 2) What are some examples of green burial?
- 3) What is embalming?
- 4) What are the environmental effects of modern funerals?
- 5) How do I plan a green funeral and burial?

Source: Mark Harris, *Grave Matters*
www.gravematters.us





What is a “green” or “natural” burial?

Green burial seeks to return one’s remains to the earth, as directly and simply as possible. It thus avoids the embalming, metal caskets and burial vaults that are standard features of the modern funeral.

In their place green burials favor interring the deceased in either cloth shrouds or in simple coffins made from cardboard or plentiful softwood, like pine. Bodies are then laid into vault-free graves, often in woodland settings available in the “natural cemeteries” or on rural land. Head-stones, when used, are typically fashioned from native fieldstones and set flush to the ground, though shrubs and trees may be used instead.

Such natural return is little more than a return to long tradition. Much of what constitutes green burial was once standard practice in this country. The goal then and now is the same: to allow the body at death to rejoin the elements it sprang from, to use what remains of a life to regenerate new life, to return dust to dust.



What are some examples of natural burial?

At its greenest, natural burial involves the interment of a shrouded or minimally-coffined body in a green setting, be it a natural cemetery or rural land. It also includes cremation – which consumes significantly fewer resources than the modern funeral – and options that return the resulting ashes (i.e., cremated remains) to the environment.

Among them are scattering ashes at sea and adding ashes to a memorial reef ball, a concrete form resembling an igloo which is then dropped into the ocean onto established reef sites, where they serve as aquatic nurseries for fish and other undersea wildlife.

Two other options allow for simple, earth-friendly burial: laying out and waking a loved one at home (i.e., conducting a home funeral) and hiring a cabinetmaker to craft a plain pine coffin.



What is embalming?

Embalming is a three-stage process of preserving a corpse for viewing: setting the deceased's "features" as they will appear in the casket, draining the body of blood and replacing it with a formaldehyde-based preservative, and then inserting a sharp-pointed "trocar" into the abdomen in order to puncture the body's inner organs, vacuum up the released bacteria and surrounding visceral fluids, and flood the "cleared" area with more formaldehyde.

No federal law states that a body must be embalmed. States rarely require it, and then sometimes only when a body is being transported across state lines or when the deceased died of a contagious disease. There is no definitive proof that embalming protects the public from disease a cadaver may harbor.



What are the environmental effects of the modern funeral?

For all its verdant landscaping, the typical cemetery functions less like a bucolic resting ground for the dead than a landfill for the materials that infuse and encase them. Over time, the typical ten-acre swatch of cemetery ground, for example, contains enough coffin wood to construct more than 40 houses, nearly 1,000 tons of casket steel and another twenty thousand tons of vault concrete. Add to that a volume of toxic formalin nearly sufficient to fill a small backyard swimming pool and untold gallons of pesticide and weed killer used to keep the cemetery grounds preternaturally green.



How Do I Plan a Natural Burial?

1 Plan Ahead

In most cases, there are organizations and companies that either offer or promote those alternatives. They can help you arrange matters in advance or at time of need.

#2 Know your laws

Natural burial is almost always a viable option, though you may have to consider legal requirements specific to your state, region and/or municipality. Lisa Carlson's book, *Caring for the Dead* (1998, Upper Access Books) offers an excellent state-by-state overview of various funerary laws. The supporting organizations I mention above will also know -- and thus know how to navigate your burial through -- the pertinent legalities.



How Do I Plan a Natural Burial?

#3 Don't go it alone

A home funeral, for one, may prove an emotionally and physically taxing endeavor. Call on family and friends to help you make arrangements, attend to business matters, and conduct funerals.

#4 Contact the Green Burial Council

This non-profit organization has established standards for truly green natural cemeteries. It also maintains a by-state list of green funeral directors and cemeteries. Web: www.greenburialcouncil.org

#5 Consult your local funeral consumers group

Sometimes known as a memorial society, a Funeral Consumers Alliance may have negotiated lower-price deals with area funeral homes, mostly for basic funerals, including cremations. Web: www.funerals.org