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Back to the earth

'Green burials' don't preserve remains with embalming, metal coffins

By Jay Levin
THE RECORD (HACKENSACK N.J.)
HACKENSACK, N.J. -- Genevieve Maiberger is excited about her burial.

When the time arrives, the retired schoolteacher from Teaneck, N.J., will be placed in a linen shroud and planted in the earth of a hilltop in a lovely meadow, along with the ashes of her husband, Leo, now on the bedroom dresser.

Golden daffodils will mark the grave in the spring.

"This is how we all should end our existence," said Maiberger, 81, who shudders at the thought of a chemically preserved body displayed at a wake and carried off in a tightly shut casket to a cemetery chockablock with engraved granite headstones.

Maiberger has chosen natural burial -- an environmentally friendly throwback to the way Americans did things before the advent of embalming 150 years ago.

"The green burial movement is totally in its infancy," said Robert Prout, a proponent of natural burial and the third-generation owner of the Prout Funeral Home in Verona, N.J., which has received awards for its use of solar power.

"But I think you'll see growth in it as baby boomers, who are just hitting 62, move into the bracket where death is staring them in the eyes."

With natural burial, the body is not filled with embalming fluid, which contains formaldehyde, a carcinogenic compound. The body is set in a biodegradable wooden coffin with no metal parts, or just a shroud, in a grave without a concrete vault. Several natural cemeteries -- scenic preserves where pesticides and weed killers are not used -- have sprung up in the last decade to accommodate such burials.

Maiberger has paid \$500 for the standard 15-by-15-foot plot at the 2-year-old Greensprings Natural Cemetery, bordered by forestland in New York's Finger Lakes region. Greensprings has interred 18 people, their graves marked by flat, natural stones and commemorative plantings.

"The majority of those who've bought sites here have some degree of environmental consciousness," said Joel Rabinowitz, the cemetery's executive director. "They like the idea of their remains going back to the earth. They like the idea of dust to dust."

To people in the green movement, final arrangements are an extension of the way they live their lives.

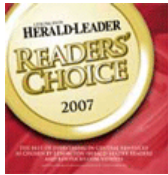
"The concept of being cremated and planting a tree has been a tradition within the movement for decades," said Jeff Tittel, director of the Sierra Club's New Jersey chapter. "A lot of us would like our ashes buried in a spot we love."

But Tittel acknowledges what natural burial proponents are quick to note: Cremation, the choice of one in three Americans, consumes fuel and releases dioxin and other pollutants. It leaves less of a footprint than

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conventional burial, but is not totally green.

Tittel says he is now rethinking his own cremation.

That comes as no surprise to the Prius-driving, conservation-minded Prout.

"I tend to think people who have opted for cremation might switch when they hear about (natural burial)," the funeral director said. "But I don't think you'll switch over someone from a mausoleum."

For now, Prout counts just one customer who has committed to a natural burial: the energetic Maiberger. She made arrangements and picked out her burial shroud last month, a day after putting in a full shift as a poll worker in Teaneck, N.J.

Funeral directors say they've sensed a bit of interest.

"Some people do talk about it," said Matt Leber of Volk Leber Funeral Home in Oradell, N.J. "But it hasn't gotten to the point of them saying, 'Arrange a green burial for me.'"

Joe Sehee, founder and executive director of the Green Burial Council, said rising interest in green burials might also be a sign that people are reclaiming control of "end-of-life rituals."

The council helps people find funeral directors willing to accommodate some form of green burial, as well as funeral professionals who can provide services and products that do not involve the use of toxins or materials that are not biodegradable.

"Since the mid-20th century, funeral directors have made a habit of whisking a body away from the recently bereaved as quickly as possible," Sehee said. "The effect has been to make us come to regard a dead person as unhygienic and perhaps even unholy while contributing to unnecessary alienation among decedents and their families."

But with green burials, "instead of turning over the body of a loved one in the middle of the night, people are now giving themselves permission and time to say good-bye. A new breed of death dula (companion-guide), who offer 'home' and 'family-directed' funeral services, as well as a growing number of conventional funeral providers, now deliver dry ice to slow down the decomposition process so family and friends can gather, pray, and sometimes even bathe the dead as was (and still is) common in many religious traditions."

'Dust to dust'

For now, people in most states had better factor out-of-state transportation into the equation. There are no natural cemeteries in Kentucky, for example.

However, one needn't buy a plot at a faraway natural cemetery to make a final environmental statement.

Among the options are choosing a plain, unvarnished pine coffin held together by dowels, instead of a metal one that never will degrade, and finding a cemetery that doesn't require concrete burial vaults. The vaults, which envelop the caskets, prevent graves from caving in and make cemetery maintenance easier, but also slow the body's dissolution and its return to the elements.

As for embalming, which preserves the body for viewing, no law requires it. In New Jersey, however, a body must be buried, cremated, embalmed or refrigerated within 48 hours after death. Families intent on having a viewing but avoiding embalming should ask the funeral director about the possibility of refrigeration or using dry ice.

These steps -- simple wooden coffin, no burial vault, no embalming -- are consistent with Jewish practices, which adhere to the biblical teaching, "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shall return."

"In my opinion, natural burials mimic what the Jewish funeral has always been about," said Martin Kasdan, general manager of Gutterman and Musicant Jewish Funeral Directors in Hackensack, N.J.

Then again, few cemeteries, Jewish or otherwise, bear even a scant resemblance to Greensprings -- 100 acres of rolling meadow, with meandering trails, wildflowers and wind-swept grass, and not a headstone in sight.

Nancy Phillips, 47, a nurse from Pittstown, N.J., can't wait to see it for herself. She is the only New Jersey resident, besides Maiberger, who has bought a plot there.

"I actually found it on the Internet," Phillips said. "I've always disliked the



Lifestyle Magazine



idea of cremation and embalming. Even though I'd be dead and wouldn't know the difference, I couldn't stand the thought of my body being put through either one of those methods.

"I try to be cognizant of the earth ... and don't want to abuse it any more than I have to. I'm very much into having my body in the ground and decaying and going back to the earth."

In opting for natural burial, Phillips will part ways with her husband, who is committed to a conventional burial in a family plot in New Jersey.

"He's going along with my wishes, so I take that as an affirmative," Phillips said. "But I think we'll be together for eternity, because our souls will meet."

Baby boomer trend

Mark Harris, a Pennsylvania-based environmental writer who makes the case for "a natural way of burial" in his recent book *Grave Matters*, says it is people such as Phillips -- a vegetarian and a baby boomer -- who will nudge natural burial closer to the mainstream.

"The generation that embraced natural childbirth and organic eating and a do-it-yourself mentality, I think, will bring that same environmental consciousness to bear on end-of-life issues," Harris said.

He thinks, too, that the funeral and cemetery industries someday will offer a menu of services considered green. He says a few conventional cemeteries have begun to set aside areas for natural burials, although Judith Welshons, executive director of the New Jersey Cemetery Association, says she knows of none in that state that has done so.

Genevieve Maiberger, meanwhile, is at peace with her decision to forgo a traditional funeral, which she deems "extravagant, not necessary and very emotional."

"I feel better knowing I'll be placed there," she said of Greensprings. "The last thing I would want is to be in a box, a casket, with people walking past me, crying. They should rejoice. 'Look, she's up there in the snow; in the spring, look at the flowers. ...'"

Green Burials in Kentucky

According to the Funeral Directors Association of Kentucky (www.fdaofky.org), Kentucky has no laws that would specifically restrict environmentally friendly burials.

However, one state law might apply. Statutes require embalming with remains that will be transported to another state, which could affect individuals who wish to be buried at cemeteries on conserved land in other states. Embalming is also required for individuals who died of a contagious disease or who will not be buried for a prolonged period of time.

The Green Burial Council, www.greenburialcouncil.org, does not list an accredited green burial director in Kentucky. Ask your funeral director for special accommodations or burial containers.

Green burial resources

Green Cemeteries in the United States:

GreenSprings Natural Cemetery - 93 acres in New York, opened in 2006, www.naturalburial.org/

Forever Fernwood - 32 acres in California, opened in 2004, www.foreverfernwood.com/

Ethician Family Cemetery - Universal Ethician Church has 81 acres in Texas, opened in 2003, www.ethicianfamilycemetery.org/

Glendale Memorial Nature Preserve - Memorial Ecosystems has 350 acres in Florida, opened in 2002, www.glendalenaturepreserve.org/

Ramsey Creek Preserve - Memorial Ecosystems has 32 acres in South Carolina, opened in 1996, www.memorialecosystems.com/

Source: www.greenburials.org

Internet sites:

www.greenburials.org

www.greenburialcouncil.org/

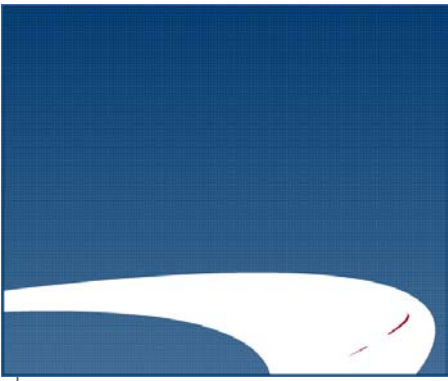
www.treehugger.com

www.kentcasket.com

<http://greenburialcouncil.org>

www.funerals.org/

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