



At the Ethician Family Cemetery near Huntsville, burials are done without embalming and without caskets made of metal or precious woods.

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Dust to dust: Earth-friendly burials

By EYDER PERALTA  
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His mother is buried on high ground, just a few feet from the shores of Lake Livingston. It's pretty, with towering pine trees and post oaks.

George Russell looks at his mom's grave, covered with big rocks and garden art. The only marker is a small flat rock painted with her initials, MHR — for Marjorie Hall Russell — and the date of her death: 5-27-07.

Marjorie was neither embalmed nor put in a large metal casket. Instead, less than 24 hours after she died, Russell dug her grave, wrapped her in a quilt and some Spanish moss, and buried her.

This, he says, is the way his mom wanted to be buried.

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As people become more concerned with protecting the environment, green burials are becoming more common.

Joe Sehee, founder and executive director of the Green Burial Council, says that he used to get one call a week, but he is now getting six calls a week from conventional cemeteries.

"They are getting calls from customers, and they are calling us," he says.

Mostly, he says, people want green funerals because it's a great way to make a final environmentally sound statement. Sehee calculates the United States uses more metal each year in caskets than was used to build the Golden Gate bridge and enough formaldehyde to fill eight Olympic-size swimming pools.

"There isn't good data on the environmental impact of formaldehyde on groundwater," says Sehee, "but our own Environmental Protection Agency calls it a 'possible carcinogen.'"

But Sehee believes beyond the environmental benefits, green burials can change the humanity of end-of-life rituals. Since the Civil War, he says, "bodies have been whisked away; we've been turning (these rituals) over to the authorities. The decedent has become alienated from the family as a result."

But today there is a move for more personal rituals, he argues. You see it in how couples pen their own vows or how hospitals have created family rooms for births.

"The metaphor is that of the midwife," he says. "We need nominal facilitation in funerals."

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Russell gets into his Jeep. He's a middle-aged man with long, stringy white hair who owns thousands of acres on the shore of Lake Livingston. For the most part, he has dedicated his semi-retired life to conserving the land: planting longleaf pines, keeping track of the turtles and bald eagles.

A few years ago, Russell thought he could start a green cemetery. It would be a great way to preserve land, he thought, and reconnect people with the earth. So he started the Universal Ethician Church and proposed 1-acre family plots that he hopes will be conserved in perpetuity.

He drives out to the main road of his property, stops on the shoulder and walks into a wooded area. He stops at one of the five graves at his place. A rabbi's wife is buried there. The only way to tell is that the mound of dirt protruding from the ground is framed by a rectangle of branches.

The burial process here is simple, Russell says. You must become an Ethician, which can happen postmortem, and you can provide a donation to church. When the time comes, family members dig the grave and bury the deceased in nothing more than a pine box.

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State law allows people to transport bodies so long as they have a death certificate with them. But bodies that have not been embalmed or refrigerated must be buried within 24 hours.

Russell drives to his father's house. His dad, Kenneth, opens a few pictures on his computer. They're of his wife's funeral. The family put her body in the back of a pickup. One picture shows her frail body wrapped in a quilt, the dog "giving her a good-bye kiss," says Russell. Another shows one of her grandchildren with a shovel.

It doesn't necessarily seem like a solemn affair, but it does seem very personal.

Kenneth stares at one of the pictures. He says matter-of-factly, "That's the way I want to go."

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