



a natural return

Magazine

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going back to nature-and tradition-with green burial

On a bright, spring morning, dozens of mourners gather at Ramsey Creek Preserve's natural cemetery to say good-bye to Chris Nichols. For nearly eight months the 28-year-old stonemason and "gentle, New Age hippie," as his mother calls him, had battled aggressive colon cancer and, two days earlier, had passed away quietly at her side.

With Chris finally at peace, wrapped in the quilts of his great-grandmothers and lying in a plain, pine coffin built by his father, friends and family have come to celebrate Chris's life and honor his dying wish. "When I die," Chris had told his brother weeks before, "I want you to give me a green burial, so I can join all the other living organisms in the ground."

a "green burial" - a simple return to the elements, in a natural setting, using nothing more than a minimal casket or cloth shroud-was a fitting request for a self-described nature lover who tended a huge organic garden in his backyard and supplied local vegetarian restaurants with his produce, says his brother, Jim. And Ramsey Creek was the perfect place to carry it out.

Nestled within a 78-acre pine and hardwood forest in the foothills of South Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains, the preserve offers simple, earth burials in a wild, thriving green. Vaults are banned, embalmed remains prohibited. Headstones, when used at all, are from fieldstone from the preserve set flush to the ground, though indigenous plants also may mark a grave. The idea, so at odds with modern burial-with its chemical preservation of the body, impervious metal caskets, and concrete burial vaults-is to allow, even invite, the natural dissolution of one's remains and return them to the elements. "We take a dust-to-dust approach to burial," explains Billy Campbell, MD, the local physician who conceived and, with his wife and business partner, Kimberley, operates Ramsey Creek. "We work to reincorporate the dead into the trees and flowers, catching them up in the cycles of life and death, decomposition and rebirth, that sustain us all."

Opened in 1998, Ramsey Creek is one of half a dozen natural cemeteries in the United States; others are in various stages of planning (see "Natural Cemeteries," opposite page). Those numbers pale next to the 22,500 conventional cemeteries that exist nationwide, but they're indicative of a sea change that's washing over the modern American funeral and coloring it green.

"There's a high level of environmental consciousness in the country, and it's coming to bear on end-of-life rituals," says Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council ([decentburial.org](#)), a nonprofit organization that connects families with funeral directors and other death-care providers that have earned the council's green seal of approval. The shift is evident not just in the new crop of natural cemeteries, says Sehee, but in the growing popularity of cremation, which accounts for nearly a third of all dispositions today, a number expected to reach 41 percent by 2025. It's also part of what's driving the nascent home funeral movement and, thanks to John E Kennedy Jr.'s watery send-off off the coast of Martha's Vineyard in 1999, a growing interest in burial at sea, among other options (see "Alternate Endings," right).

According to Sehee, the modern funeral's eco-makeover is long overdue. With its chemical embalming, bulletproof metal caskets, and four-ton burial vaults, the standard funeral-home send-off is an extravagance of resources. "Enough metal is poured into

coffins and burial vaults every year to rebuild the Golden Gate Bridge," he says, "and the concrete used to make burial vaults is sufficient to build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit." Add to that the more than 825,000 gallons of toxic embalming fluid buried each year in deceased human hosts, and the local cemetery begins to look less like a peaceful resting ground than a landfill of hazardous and largely nonbiodegradable material.

By contrast, green burial goes light on goods and materials -opting, for cardboard or pine coffins and small fieldstone grave markers, and skipping the embalming process and the burial vault altogether. The earth is literally all the richer for it. Returned directly to the ground, the body rapidly decays and renourishes soil, pushing up a tree, wildflowers, native vegetation.

Green burial isn't just about the environment, however. With its simple ceremonies and low cost (about 52,000 versus an average \$6,500 for the conventional funeral), a natural return speaks to old-fashioned American values like thrift and self-sufficiency. And while it may seem like a "new" approach, it couldn't be more in keeping with the way early Americans routinely buried their dead, contends Campbell of Ramsey Creek. Until the late 1800s, families washed and laid out their deceased in the front parlor, hired the local carpenter to craft a plain pine box, and buried the remains in the back 40 or a community cemetery, often in a grave dug by family members. There was no embalming, no fancy casket, or burial vault. A body consigned to the earth actually returned to the earth and became a part of it.

Ramsey Creek is a return to that long and still-honorable tradition, with one added benefit: The burials help preserve good land from development. "What finer legacy could you leave behind than acres of beautiful woods-your final act in death contributing to the preservation of wildlife?" asks Campbell.

Sharon Perry, Chris's mother, calls Ramsey Creek "a place of life, not death." And, as the funeral train trails the pallbearers down the dirt path leading to the woodland cemetery, it is life that's most in evidence: the forest springing into bloom, sunlight filtering through the tall canopy of trees, birds chirping, the grave sites they pass so minimal and covered over with vegetation they're almost inconspicuous.

When they reach Chris's grave, the pallbearers set his coffin atop three wooden slats that span the opening, which is strewn with pine needles and red and white rose petals, a basket of flowers at the head spilling out a profusion of wildflowers. The group fans out around the grave, everyone finding a place to sit or stand among the trees and saplings and ferns rising from the forest floor. Sharon steps forward, offers a prayer for her son, and reads one of his poems, Jim then recalls how much "cooler" his brother was and, reaching into his backpack, pulls out tie-dyed T-shirts like those Chris favored and, to much laughter, tosses them into the crowd. As the mourners don the colorful shirts, other family and friends come forward to offer prayers and a few words about Chris.

When the time comes, the pallbearers reassemble around the coffin, raising it off the slats and lowering it into the grave. Jim grabs a shovel from the mound of dirt and scatters the first scoop of soil over his brother's coffin, filling this corner of the woods with a resounding thud that one mourner says "puts your life into perspective like no other in the world." Sharon follows suit, and the others join in, each depositing a bit of dirt into the hole. A couple of Chris's friends then undertake the heavy spadework, covering over the grave with fresh earth.

Afterward, back at Chris's dad's house, there's a picnic in celebration of Chris's life. It's hard to celebrate any lost life, but her son's green burial has made it a bit much easier, says Sharon. "Chris loved the earth and treated it with great respect. What better way for us to honor him than to return him to it?" Environmental journalist Mark Harris is the author of *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial*.

[Sidebar]

alternate endings

Burial in a natural cemetery offers a green way to go, but it's not the only one. Consider these alternatives:

Burial at Sea

Scattering cremated remains or consigning a body to the ocean. The EPA requires that ashes be scattered at least three miles from shore (except for California, where the limit is 500 yards). Wholebody sea burial must additionally take place in wafers that are at least 000 feet deep, with the body prepared fo ensure that it sinks to the ocean floor (typically via a coffin riddled with holes).

Simple Coffins

Purchasing a wooden coffin, typically made of pine or another plentiful timber, from a local carpenter or by building your own. By law, a funeral director must accept this "third-party" casket without charging you a handling fee.

Cremation

Reducing a body to several pounds of "ashes" by exposing if to an average temperature of 1,000Å°F. You may legally scatter ashes on your own land; scattering on public or private land, such as parks or forests, requires the permission of the proper authorities or the property owner.

Memorial Reef

A waist-high, honeycombed igloo formed from a mix of concrete and human ashes that hardens and is later sunk onto established reef sites in the Atlantic Ocean or Gulf of Mexico, where it serves as a sea-creature habitat. The brainchild of Eternal Reefs (eternalreefs.com).

Home Funeral

A time-honored tradition in which families wash, dress, and lay out the deceased (usually on dry ice) in their own homes. Legal in all but a handful of states (which require the participation of a funeral director).

natural cemeteries

The burial grounds listed below allow the body to return to a natural environment directly and simply. Metal coffins, vaults, and embalming are prohibited; simple grave markers of fieldstone or vegetation are welcome. Scattering or interring of ashes is also possible. The cost of burial varies, but averages in the \$1 ,000 range. "Opening/closing"- i.e., digging and filling in the grave- is usually extra.

If none of these natural cemeteries is near you, ask your local cemetery about the possibility of greener burial there. Most traditional cemeteries require the use of a burial vault- a concrete box that encloses the casket- but some may allow unvaulted burial somewhere on the property or burial with only a concrete grave liner, which is open on the bottom.

Ramsey Creek Preserve

(Westminster, S.C.)

A 78-acre woodland abutting the Blue Ridge Mountains.

memorialecosystems.com

Olendole Memorial Nature Preserve

(DeFuniak Springs, Fla.)

A 70-acre burial ground within a larger expanse of creeks, ponds, and woods on the Florida panhandle.

glendalenaturepreserve.org

Forever Fernwood

(Mill Valley, Calif.)

Thirty-two acres of grasslands, brush, and mixed forest north of San Francisco.

foreverfernwood.com/html/ecology

Ethician Family Cemetery

(Huntsville, Tex.)

Eighty-plus acres of old-growth pine and hardwoods near Lake Livingston, 90 minutes north of Houston.

efhicianfamilycemetery.org

Greensprngs Natural Cemetery Preserve

(Newfield, N.Y.)

A hundred acres of rolling hilltop meadows south of Cayuga Lake, near Ithaca.

naturalburial.org

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