



By Kair L. Purvis

GREEN BURIAL PITTSBURGH

As part of an environmentally conscious lifestyle, have you considered an environmentally-friendly or “green” burial for yourself or loved ones?

What is “green burial?”

The goal of a “green” or natural burial is to return the body in the simplest manner possible, with the least damage to Mother Earth and her inhabitants. A “green” burial includes a biodegradable container, no embalming, and no vault. “Green” burials avoid anything which will inhibit decomposition in order for the body to recycle naturally. It is an environmentally sustainable and economical alternative to our current funeral practices.

In “green” burials, natural grave markers such as flowers, trees, and shrubs don’t intrude on the landscape. A flat indigenous stone can also be engraved. Planting near the grave establishes a living memorial. Irrigation, pesticides, and herbicides are avoided. As in all cemeteries, there are records kept of the exact location of each interment, often using survey techniques such as GIS.

Coffins:

“Green” coffins are made from materials that are readily biodegrade. Ideally, the materials are easily renewable or recycled. In 2006, 80-85% of the caskets sold for burial in North America were stamped steel. Solid wood and particle board coffins with hardwood veneers comprise 10-15% of the sales, with fiberglass and alternative materials making up the rest. More expensive coffins are often manufactured using exotic, and in some cases, endangered species of wood and are designed to prevent decomposition. These sealed caskets are then put into a vault or wall crypt and must contend with anaerobic bacteria. Not a pretty story. In “green” burial a simple cotton shroud is another option.

Embalming:

Embalming adds sanitizing and disinfectant agents as well as chemicals to retard decomposition. No state or province in North America requires routine embalming of bodies. Surprised? When specified by state ordinance, refrigeration, chilling, or dry ice can be legally substituted for embalming as it is here in Pennsylvania.

Formaldehyde is a known carcinogen and it is believed to have negative health effects. The regular use of formaldehyde explains

mortuary workers higher rates of cancer. Formaldehyde is also implicated in ALS, nervous system disorders, and other ailments. Its volatility requires workers to wear respirators while using it. In most funeral homes in our country, the embalming fluid and internal contents are flushed directly into our waste water. The potential for embalming fluid to contaminate water, soil, or water tables has not been thoroughly studied.

Environmental issues with conventional burial:

Each year, 22,500 cemeteries across the United States bury approximately:

- 30 million board feet of hardwoods
- 104,272 tons of steel
- 2,700 tons of copper and bronze
- 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete
- 827,060 gallons of embalming fluid, which most commonly includes formaldehyde

Cremation:

Cremation is more cost-effective than a traditional burial, but has its own adverse environmental impacts. The biggest issue is fossil fuel consumption used during the cremation process. A single cremation uses the same amount of energy as is consumed driving 4,800 miles. Total energy expenditure for all cremations performed in the U.S. each year could instead be used to propel someone to the moon and back 85 times.

The mission of “Green Burial Pittsburgh”:

1. To promote natural burial to Pittsburgh area funeral consumers as an environmentally friendly, low-cost alternative to conventional burial practices or cremation
2. To establish woodland “green cemeteries” in or near Pittsburgh that offer natural burial exclusively to funeral consumers
3. To choose locations for “green cemeteries” in designated conservation burial grounds
4. To use a portion of cemetery income to help conserve land and restore it to its natural condition
5. To purchase additional land for conservation

For further study:

www.greenburialpittsburgh.org • www.finaljourneyhome.com
www.greenburialcouncil.org • www.gravematters.us