

When preparing for Sister Death, Let's Be Kind to Mother Earth!

Now about this, you really don't get a choice.

Even though life has presented you with endless choices, large and small, sacred and mundane, roads not taken, bridges crossed, our pilgrimage thru life always meets Sister Death. But we do have a choice of how we face death. Do we see death as a natural part of living, a change in form leading to new life, or a fearsome extinction, full of dread, or perhaps a simple turning off of the lights at the end of a long day? How we face Sister Death reveals much about our common humanity, but also about who we are as an individual.

Fifteen years ago, my husband and I surprisingly became inspired to open a cemetery near Austin Texas, , that had the natural beauty, gardens, and artistic memorialization of cemeteries that we observed in our many summers in Austria. My husband, being an artist/blacksmith, had dragged the family to many cemeteries to take photos of the fantastic ironwork, while our 5 children and I would meander around the lovely grave gardens, and feel the stories behind the monuments and memorial

photographs that looked back at us, reading dates and inscriptions. We never dreamed that one day we would open our own cemetery in Georgetown, Texas to create a place of beauty and consolation, of healing and peace, reviving the art of memorialization.



I have observed a wide range of attitudes and cultural preferences toward burial. Because we welcome green or natural burial at Our Lady, many families choose this Franciscan simplicity as part of their spiritual journey with Sister Death. Green burial takes many forms, but it is basically the loved ones body is not embalmed, is wrapped in a shroud, or placed in simple wood or cardboard casket, or wicker basket, lowered into the 'sleeping place' (the Greek meaning for cemetery). Down 4-5' below the surface of the earth is a quiet place, a depth at which one gently becomes part of 'ashes to ashes,

dust to dust'. Most of the world excepting some First World countries have long practiced natural burial as part of their faith traditions.

While families are free to choose at Our Lady, some people exhibit unease at death and the most natural processes that follow (and surround us everywhere) that they go to extraordinary measures to try to stop them. Of course these are as futile as trying to stop death, but a 'traditional' burial American style would likely have the loved one's body embalmed, placed in an expensive wood or steel casket, often inside a sealed vault or concrete liner, in sterile manicured cemetery which only allow plastic flowers and generic choices of headstones in grey or black granite from China.

Ben Franklin once said, "Show me your cemeteries and I'll show you what kind of people you are." Is this really who we are, or have we been herded by large corporate interests to forget to be maverick individualists, with a great passion for nature, for the sacredness of life, and conservation of the beauty of our land? Do these corporate models, so neglectful of our stewardship responsibilities really



get to dominate how we honor our dead, fulfill our sacred duties, console the grieving, and create a legacy for future generations?

In an all-American spirit of rebellion those 15 years ago, my artist blacksmith husband and I started a different kind of cemetery, full of wondrous natural beauty, contemplative walks, legendary wildflowers, woods leading to a waterfall (in Texas now, either dry or gushing with water, into a spring fed pond).

This is where turtles and blue heron, butterflies and dragonflies and fireflies find sanctuary. In this burial sanctuary, all people of goodwill are welcomed, united in their mortality and humanity under a blanket of wildflowers in the spring. This is a place where consolation is poured out, in the healing cycles of nature, in wonder of her sunsets over the pond, and where other grieving visitors become friends while sharing losses and gardening advise. Here there is the freedom to plant a garden over a



loved ones grave and feel the healing of the soul while the earth mends and offers up new life; seedlings become bluebonnets, pale pink and white striped wine cups, and other surprising little gifts of nature. One sees first hand that nothing ever dies but only changes form, in the seasonal cycles where winter looks brown and lifeless but then resurrects in a springtime riot of blooms and fragrance.



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Our Lady of the Rosary Cemetery and Prayer Gardens was the first xeriscaped Perpetual Care Cemetery in the US, and the first green burial

cemetery in Texas which was open to all, and it is thanks to the years of dedicated gardening by the Williamson County Master Gardeners, the Native Plant Society, and Good Water Master Gardeners that 'Our Lady' has become renowned for her park like beauty and gardens. Over 330 rose bushes grace the landscape with their enduring blooms. In addition, 'Our Lady' is a University of Kansas Monarch Butterfly Station, a National Parks and Wildlife Demonstration Site, and a Texas Parks and Recreation Habitat Steward and the site of 13 Eagle Scout projects. LadyBird Johnson was an inspiration to our natural approach, and following a PBS Central Texas Gardener episode on Our Lady, the former First Lady asked to have a private visit to this unique application of her beloved Texas Wildflowers. (Unfortunately she died before we had this honor, but this April 25, 2020, the LadyBird Wildflower Center in Austin has our cemetery on its Tour of Gardens for a day trip.)



## **Sustainable Living In Dying**

During our lives, Mother Earth sustains us, feeds us, graces us, fills us awe and wonder. And we have a gift of thanksgiving to give her, our very bodies, filled with beneficial nutrients to return to the earth. However, embalming has the opposite effect, of adding carcinogenic toxins into our beloved dead, and into the earth, exposing funeral home workers to one of the top 10 most hazardous chemicals, formaldehyde, according to the EPA. 800,000 gallons of this carcinogenic cocktail are put into the earth each year due to embalming leaching out of the casket and into the soil, in a futile effort to preserve the body indefinitely. Additionally, 115 tons of steel and 4 million acres of woods go into the making of caskets and vaults. Two billion tons of concrete goes underground into concrete liners annually.

Cremation is growing rapidly in popularity, but many do not realize that option is an economical one, but not an environmentally sound one. The worst ecological scenario is if one is embalmed for the funeral and the cremation occurs afterwards, but



many would be surprised to know that direct cremation also has its hazards. The CO2 emissions for the 1.4 million people cremated last year equaled the emissions of 52,000 cars driven annually. The smoke released from the hot cremation fires contain harmful substances such as carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, dioxin, and mercury vapor, all of which return to damage the earth and pollute water.

The happy news is that once informed of these sustainability issues and choices, many people come to appreciate green burial, and 54% of



Americans are now considering natural burial. While 'Our Lady' is proud to be a forerunner in this ecological movement, we hope it grows well beyond the few in Texas, and the 93 US cemeteries presently offering this benevolent sustainable way of life after death. Let us walk in peace with Sister Death and remember with gratitude, our Mother Earth.

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