



A Guide for Green Burial

Green, a.k.a., *natural* burial has been steadily increasing in popularity. This is not only because people have become aware of its availability as an earth-friendly way to lay to rest a loved one, but also because they are discovering the profoundly unique experience this method of burial affords. It is certainly a moving memorial to the departed but it is perhaps even more valuable for its healing effect on those grieving the loss of their loved one.

In the years since 2008 when I became involved with the green burial movement, which was then in its infancy in the US, I have observed the different reactions of people who experienced it—either having themselves chosen green burial for a loved one, or attended a green burial that

was arranged by someone else. Their response has been overwhelmingly positive, with great appreciation for this option of a simple, non-invasive funeral experience, and particularly, the flexibility it offers families, with the added bonus of not being dependent on marketing funeral merchandise, such as the wide range of casket selection for a conventional burial, vault types, etc...

Here's what I have learned over the years from guiding many families through the green burial process:

Like any burial, green burial begins with *the phone call*—someone inquiring about natural burial, and what is involved; often callers already know it is what they want, and are looking for direction on how to proceed. I explain the different aspects of providing this service, why I choose to offer it, and what I consider to be its many benefits and that indeed, I choose this for myself. Then I carefully listen to their questions, and give them clear answers. Sometimes callers tell me they thought the cost would be similar to cremation. It isn't, but once I've explained why, they realize that because there's much more involved with green burial, it makes sense that it costs more than cremation, but generally less than a conventional burial. I also point out that families can be involved in the process as little or as much as they desire, for example, by assisting in dressing the deceased, applying the shroud or placing the deceased into the casket, lowering their loved one into the ground, and backfilling the grave as much or as little as they care to do. It's amazing how often people find a sense of relief in the simple physical act of shoveling dirt; I think it helps them feel like there's something they can do, rather than just feeling so helpless, as we often do when dealing with the death of a loved one. We also offer a visitation at a residence, church, funeral home, chapel or other location. Sometimes, just a simple graveside experience is preferred.

After gathering some basic information, such as place of death, circumstances surrounding the death, and when the death occurred, I talk about options with the family, and try to determine what they have in mind. Usually, we schedule an arrangement conference, as we do with any type of funeral, during which we discuss the details of the chosen memorial and burial. Often families are in other states, in which case I offer to send electronic documents for authorizations, and I handle the information gathering over the phone.

From the start, things we must consider when contemplating a green burial include the condition of the deceased, when and where they passed, whether a viewing is desired, whether there will be a service of some sort and where it will take place, whether the family wants an eco-friendly embalming performed, in the event family members require more time for travel or other considerations, and other options for preservation prior to the burial. Most families understand that embalming and other invasive procedures are antithetical to the intrinsic purpose of green burial, which is to facilitate the natural process of a body returning to nature, and they do not choose to embalm. We will discuss the option of burial in either a shroud alone, or in a suitable coffin, which must be sustainable and biodegradable. Such a coffin can be made of, for example, non-varnished wood or some type of wicker, seagrass, bamboo, or other natural, organic material. For the option of burial in a shroud alone, I have to first assess the condition of the deceased in order to determine whether it would be appropriate.

As far as non-invasive preservation techniques are concerned, ice packs are effective, and afford us the ability to transfer the deceased, without embalming, from anywhere in the country, and this method is accepted by most airlines. Alternatively, we will personally travel and transport the deceased ourselves to the funeral home. Using a specified amount of ice packs, or dry ice (dry ice is not accepted for air transfer) we can keep the body cool for an extended period of time while awaiting burial.

Based on my assessment of the deceased, I then discuss with the family the options available to them. These involve the form of dressing, whether casket or shroud, or both, and selection of a cemetery that will accommodate a natural burial. Such a cemetery would optimally not require a concrete vault, and will allow a non-casketed burial, or a coffin made of biodegradable materials.

It is important to note that, if the situation permits, we can provide a brief viewing, perhaps a service in a church or other place of worship, or a simple graveside service, with clergy or family and friends offering their thoughts, prayers, and memories of the loved one they are laying to rest. I assure the family that I will do everything I can to accommodate their wishes, with the understanding that there may be certain situations that could limit their options.

Once the services and cemetery are selected, the family's wishes will be carried out according to the arrangements made at the conference. After the loved one is in our care, the body will be washed, and positioned for burial. Dressing, shrouding, and/or casketing, according to the particular funeral arrangements, will take place shortly before any service or burial. In the case of a viewing without eco-friendly embalming, dry ice will be used, but not seen, for preservation. It is a good idea to have wax paper (to use in lieu of plastics) and a few dozen ice packs on hand, and it is a great advantage to have a friendly relationship with a dry ice distributor who is able to provide small blocks as needed.

As for any funeral service, families can choose memorial items, such as memorial cards, service programs, guest book, picture boards, a tribute video (if the service will take place where electricity is available), an obituary, and other items as desired.

One of most sublime aspects of green burial is the beauty of the natural burial ground, whether in a forest, in a field, or on a mountain. One such location we use is in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, and features breathtaking vistas, especially in the fall. Another cemetery, located near the New Jersey shore, is surrounded on three sides by the Belleplain State Forest, and has green moss-carpeted trails meandering through the trees. The vibe is simple, comforting, and pleasing to the senses.

At the burial, families can participate to the extent they choose; they can help guide the ropes that lower their loved one into the earth, or they can simply stand by and bid a quiet farewell. I have found that most families will want to participate, even to the point of filling in the grave by hand, using shovels provided by the cemetery. Some cemeteries invite the family to select a grave marker from an array of field stones, which are natural stones or rocks, native to the area, gathered from the cemetery grounds. These can usually be professionally engraved, but many families will choose to decorate them; some families will provide a specially crafted marker.

Manufactured headstones are discouraged, though, as they tend to disrupt the natural setting. It is inspiring and comforting to hear nothing but God's creation--the breeze shuffling the tree branches, the birds chiming in with their cheery chirps, and other wildlife. Rarely is the mechanical sound of a car or truck heard, only the varied notes of nature's rhythms.

In the opinion of this author, informed by what I have witnessed over and over, the simple wonder of nature's spectacular beauty lends healing to the beginning of a grieving process that no one can predict. It softens the heart to accept and be consoled by the knowledge that we are from dust, and unto dust we shall return.

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