

“You can be a tree”

Cynthia Beal, founder of the Natural Burial Company, thinks we should all become bushes, meadows or trees after we die.

What's wrong with conventional burial?

“Conventional burial typically has us preserved in formaldehyde-based fluid, packed in one box made of materials like steel, plastic, chipboard and exotic hardwood, sealed in another, buried far down and then left there.”

Er, that's not good?

“That stuff stays in the ground, preventing the body's natural return to the earth. Cemeteries are mowed, sprayed and irrigated at great expense as well. Someday we'll notice by-products from the herbicides, plastics, finishes and synthetics that stuff the coffin leaking into the soil and groundwater. They may have to dig us up again, unpack us and compost us properly.”

Isn't cremation eco-friendly?

“It can be, but there's always the energy and emissions to account for. Cremation isn't the best we can do.”

What can a natural burial look like?

“The basic requirements are a clean, formaldehyde-free body, a biodegradable vessel and a vault-free burial. You can be buried in a natural coffin, with a tree planted on your grave. You'd sequester carbon, breathe out oxygen and feed the soil web. You'd return to the earth to become a tree—or bush or meadow—and create habitat for animals and living things.”

Cool! Why aren't we all doing this?

“It's not an easy option yet, but it's coming. The practise of over-regulating the funeral business for reasons other than public health and safety has favored those who've taken over our coffin-making, cemetery operation and funeral-service provision. These monopolies prevent natural methods, but they're hearing from folks who want environmental options. This is a lot like the natural foods industry two decades ago. It's not a fad. It's just natural. You can be a tree, and we can make that happen.”—MARCO VISSCHER

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