

Thinking Outside the Box

by **DANA LIPNICKI** /// EAC Staff

The inevitable reality of death is a topic that many of us prefer to avoid. It makes us squeamish, uncomfortable, vulnerable. It is also something that we all have in common. It brings our communities together so that we can bond, mourn, and deepen our relationships with each other. It is an opportunity for us to remember and reflect on the values a person has lived, and how those values might affect us moving forward.

Growing up, I knew of just two ways that one could finalize their life: conventional cremation and conventional burial. Death in an environmental context had never crossed my mind. I suppose I assumed cremation would be a “greener” way to return to the Earth, as it takes up less physical space than a traditional gravesite. Looking into it, I discovered that conventional cremation and burial both carry a substantial environmental impact.

Cremation is the most popular alternative to burial—78 per cent of Nova Scotians currently choose cremation. The process requires large amounts of fossil fuels. During the cremation process, many different chemicals and carcinogens, including carbon dioxide, hydrochloric acid, mercury, hydrogen chloride, and nitrogen oxide, are released into the environment.

Conventional burial is not eco-friendly, either. Death Matters, a Halifax-based business, says a typical cemetery buries “4,500 litres of formaldehyde-based embalming fluid, 97 tonnes of steel, 2,000 tonnes of concrete and 56,000 board feet of tropical hardwood in every acre of space. Add to that the tonnes of cut flowers and carbon emissions from mourners’ vehicles.”

As an environmentalist, I want my values to be recognized and celebrated through death. I don’t want my remains to pollute the planet through my decomposition. Until recently, I didn’t know I had any other option. Then, a few months ago I joined a working group at the Ecology Action Centre called Green Burial Nova Scotia where I learned about the concept of green burial.

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As defined by the Green Burial Society of Canada, a “Green Burial is a statement of personal values for those who seek to minimize their impact on the local and global environment. For people who are mindful of the cyclical nature of life, green burial is a spiritually fulfilling alternative to conventional burial or cremation. It is an environmentally sensitive practice: the body is returned to the earth to decompose naturally and contribute to new life.”

Green burials are not a new idea. Historically, many funerals involved burial of an unembalmed body in a simple box. The practice lost favour in the mid-19th century. But more recently, they have been making a comeback. This movement of returning to nature at the end of our life really took off in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s. At that time, 98 per cent of British people were being cremated at the end of their lives. Due to environmental concerns regarding carbon emissions and our environment, as well as the issue of expanding urbanization, green burials became an obvious part of their solution.

Green burials are now gaining popularity in the United States and Canada. In 2008, Canada’s first urban green burial site, Denman Island Natural Burial Cemetery, opened in Victoria, BC. In 2015 the Green Burial Council of Canada conducted a survey that found that the demand for green burial services across 70 cemeteries had increased by 74.6 per cent since the introduction of these options!

There are five main principles that are essential to having a green burial, as taken from the Green Burial Society of Canada’s website:

1. No Embalming—Decomposition is how the body is recycled naturally. Embalming relies on formaldehyde and other chemicals that leach into our soil and groundwater.
2. Direct Earth Burial—A shroud made of natural, biodegradable fibres dresses the body, and then is buried either directly in the grave or placed into a casket or alternative form of container made of biodegradable, sustainable materials, ideally sourced locally. No unnatural grave liners or protective vaults are used.
3. Ecological Restoration and Conservation—Local, indigenous plants, including groundcover, shrubs and trees are placed over the grave once its settled. Visitation is managed through thoughtful placement of walking paths and the occasional bench, optimally placed with a view of the communal memorial for the site. Site preservation and everlasting land protection are key components of a green burial. Covenants, protective easements and other enforceable guarantees made by the green burial cemetery operator are put in place to ensure the site will never be repurposed and the natural ecosystem protected.
4. Communal Memorialization—Individual memorials like headstones are discouraged, in favour of communal memorialization with a simple inscription. The ecology that grows there is a living memorial of that person’s life. However, GIS tracking ensures that one’s location will never be forgotten.
5. Optimize Land Use—Infrastructure is kept at a minimum, pragmatic grave sizes and section lot plans that maximize capacity are some of the considerations applied. In areas where there have been many green burials and space may be an issue, new ‘border or surplus’ zones may be created for the green burial of cremated remains using surface or subsurface disposition methods.

OTHER WAYS TO BE GREEN THROUGH DEATH

Make your reception locally-sourced. Reduce greenhouse gas emissions created through food and flower importation, and support your local gardeners and growers one last time!

Leave a legacy gift in your will to an environmental charity like the Ecology Action Centre. Legacy Donors give us the ability to do more to protect our environment. To discuss the possibility of leaving a Legacy to the EAC in your will, contact Dana Lipnicki, at dana@ecologyaction.ca.

Learn more at: ecologyaction.ca/planned-giving-0

“We have the ability to influence the future of our planet through our death...”

At the end of one’s life, there is only one thing that is legally required: a medical certificate of death. It felt empowering to learn that everything else is up to me. Whether you choose to be buried or cremated conventionally, or be the feature in your own green burial, it is ultimately your choice how you decide to make it an ode to your values and your life story.

ONLINE RESOURCES TO HELP YOU LEARN MORE ABOUT GREEN BURIALS IN CANADA

- deathmatters.ca
- naturalburialassoc.ca
- greenburialcanada.ca

Fast Facts about conventional burial practices

- **2.2 million gallons** of Formaldehyde-laden embalming fluid are used in Canada every year, and funeral home workers are frequently exposed to it.
- It is estimated that a single cremation uses **92 cubic metres of natural gas** – enough to supply the average Canadian home for 12.5 days – and releases 0.8 to 5.9 grams of mercury.
- Many Jewish and Muslim burials are **green burials by tradition**.
- We have the ability to influence the future of our planet through our death... **that’s pretty cool!**
- **As of September 17, 2018**, The Green Burials Society of Canada is now accepting applications from cemeteries across the country to become a GBSC approved provider. With this exciting change, we hope to see green burials become more accessible to all.

Dana Lipnicki is the EAC’s Community Giving Manager and is a member of the Green Burial NS group.