

Where will I go when Iâ??m gone?

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A SENIOR BEAT COLUMN



My cousinâ??s daughter had a baby last week, just a few days before I turned 80. My thoughts exalted, I riffed on baby Zoeyâ??s beautiful new life in London with her American mother and French father. Sheâ??ll be bilingual and will be so adored as the first grandchild on both sides.

Joyfully engaged, I was shocked when my mind crashed as I glanced at my hands. Protruding blue veins ran like tributaries from my wrists through wrinkly skin territory to my fingers. Letâ??s get real: Eighty is not the new 60.

Turning 80 makes me shaky scared, because I remember what an 85-year-old friend told me, â??My friends are either falling or dying,â?• Yikes! I am going to die, and I better decide what to do with myself

I flashed back on having read Jessica Mitfordâ??s 1963 muckraking expose of the death industry. She said death had become overly sentimentalized enabling funeral directors to use mournersâ?? emotions to stick them with ever-increasing prices.

That led me to want to know what was it like before death become a major industry in this country?

Buried in the back yard

Until the 1860s, body disposition after death was simple, straightforward, and practically costless. People died in their homes. Loved ones washed, dressed, and combed their personâ??s hair. The deceased was laid out on the dining room table, on a bed, or on a plank across two sawhorses.

After two or three days of sitting with their loved one (this was to ensure no one was buried alive â?? a popular fear back then), neighbors helped build a coffin and provided food for the grieving family. A shroud made from winding a sheet was often used instead of a coffin.

Deceased persons were buried in the backyard, on the family farm, or in a local cemetery.

Well, this sounded pretty good to me except that I couldnâ??t see my children laying my body out on the dining room table, and in California, one isnâ??t allowed to bury people in their backyards or even on acres of land.

So, I was curious, what happened in the 1860s to change things? Dr. Thomas Holmes (1817-1900) developed embalming fluid, which enabled the well-off families of Union soldiers to preserve their sonsâ?? bodies so they could be transported from the South by train back to their homes in the North for burial.

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Over the years, those Civil War embalmers morphed into professional morticians and the modern funeral industry was born. Neighborsâ?? assistance was replaced with a paid workforce.

Well, what exactly is embalming? My father was embalmed after he died in 1964. He looked God-awful â?? a Madame Tussaud wax museum figure gone rogue.

Embalming fluid is a nasty toxin, composed of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde, methanol, ethanol, phenol, glycerin, water, and possibly dyes to simulate a life-like skin tone. Itâ??s estimated that 800,000 gallons of formaldehyde are placed in the ground each year due to conventional burials.

Youâ??ve got 24 hours

The good news is embalming is not required in California except for long public visitations, transit in airplanes, entombment in a mausoleum, or for medical science. Without embalming, bodies must be disposed of within 24 hours of death, unless they are kept refrigerated. Exceptions are made for home funerals.

I know a home funeral isnâ??t on the agenda for me, so what am I looking at with a conventional burial? Spending big bucks. In the Bay Area, cemetery plots are $7,000 to $15,000. Cost of funeral home services, $3,500 to $6,000. Cost of metal or exotic wood caskets (formerly known as coffins, from the French *cassette* referring to a jewelry box) $695 to $15,000. To mark your grave, the headstone â?? a concrete upright, $1,000 to $3,000, a flat one, $280 to $1,500.

Calculating the least expensive cost of conventional burial in the Bay Area at $11,500, Iâ??d rather give my grandsons that money for college tuition.

Furthermore, I canâ??t support the use of concrete vaults or grave liners, precious land, and all those copper, bronze and exotic hardwood caskets buried in the ground. Then thereâ??s the maintenance of the cemeteries using water, a scarce resource, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides, all to showcase vibrant green lawns.

But I get it why people want to be encased in metal. They think theyâ??ll protect themselves from the elements and wonâ??t be attacked by maggots. Agreed maggots are gross, but decomposition also happens inside a metal casket due to microbial activity, just at a slower rate.

Iâ??m looking for more a cost-effective body disposal solution that sustains the earth. Does one exist?

Just â??burn me upâ??

When I filled out my Advance Health Care Directive a few years ago I opted for cremation. Burn me up, I told my children, and spread my ashes in the forest, my spiritual happy place.

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And the price is right. Even in the Bay Area you can get cremated for as little as $1,300. In America cremation now accounts for 54.6 percent of body dispositions.

But since my original decision about ten years ago, thereâ??s been a greater awareness of what cremation releases into the atmosphere: fine soot, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, heavy metals, and mercury from dental filings.

Just to focus on mercury, it has toxic effects on the nervous, digestive, and immune systems, and on the lungs, kidneys, skin, and eyes. The World Health Organization considers mercury one of the top ten chemicals of major public health concern.

So, no cremation. I just canâ??t do it. But where does that leave me?

Alkaline Hydrolysis has been legal in California since 2017. It is a method Stephen King used to get rid of an inconvenient corpse in his book â??Bag of Bones.â?• Aquamation, as it is also known, uses lye, 300-degree heat and 60 pounds of pressure per square inch in big stainless-steel cylinders that are like pressure cookers to reduce the body to effluent and bones.

The sterile green/brown fluid of water, salt, sugars, amino acids and peptides is disposed via the sewer and undergoes wastewater treatment. The remaining bones are crushed into ash and returned to the family of the deceased, as in cremation.

For me, thatâ??s too gory, uses too much water, and thereâ??s no one offering it yet in the Bay Area anyway. So that method is a non-starter.

The best final rest

I finally hit upon a process I like thatâ??s eco-friendly. Itâ??s body composting, or natural organic reduction. I would choose it in a heartbeat if there was a place offering it now in the Bay Area. Itâ??s legal in 20 states, and California just legalized it, but the law wonâ??t go into effect until 2027.

The beauty of body composting for me is that it wonâ??t put noxious gas emissions into the atmosphere, toxic chemicals into ground or use too much water.

Through a gentle transformation process that takes between six and 10 weeks (plus two to four weeks additional to cure and dry the soil in a bin), bodies are turned into one cubic yard of soil to be used in your garden or donated to a regional conservation project. I am aligned with the idea of sunflowers or broccoli growing out of me.

Your body, rich in nitrogen, is placed in a steel vessel in a temperature-controlled environment. Items rich in carbon â?? woodchips, alfalfa and straw â?? are added. Then a steady stream of oxygen is applied along with heat to facilitate the decomposition process. The tiny, microbial creatures do their work and old molecules change into new molecules. Poetry in motion.



Plan B is a green burial. (Image by wirestock on Freepik)

But alas, that reality is four years off, so in the meantime, I need plan B, which is a green burial.

Green burial means your body, not embalmed, is buried in a biodegradable container, or silk, cotton, or wool shroud. Your body is buried not at six feet, but at a depth of three to four feet, where decomposition is assisted by greater amounts of oxygen and bacteria.

Native plants and trees adorn the gravesite, and if headstones are used, they are natural flat stones indigenous to the burial ground. Sometimes there are GPS markers.

Dying isnâ??t cheap

In the Bay Area, I found a â??hybridâ?• cemetery (part conventional burial, part green) In Mill Valley. Fernwood Cemetery charges $18,000 for your plot, the opening and closing of the grave, and your space is marked. Beautiful place. Is there anything less expensive?

Purissima Cemetery in Half Moon Bay is on gorgeous land. Your cost would be $5,000 to $7,000, service complete, with a marked grave. The thought of the view makes me happy and gives me peace of mind, but again, a bit pricey.

Then, aha! I found my place. Greenlawn Memorial Park in Colma offers a shared, unmarked space for a bargain $1,758.50. A shared space? Horrors, you say? Me, Iâ??d like the company. Unmarked grave? No problem. My children will remember me in their feelings.

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When considering body disposition, you might also have to factor in religious preferences and family traditions. But, let spirit be your guide. We donâ??t have a choice in how we come into this life, but we do have many choices in how we want our body to be handled going out.

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Date Created
28/10/2022
Author
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