On the way back to being dust

By Steve Thorngate
March 16, 2015

Our impoverished spirituality around death and burial has been well documented in the *Century,* among other places. From the corpseless memorial service to the private lowering of embalmed bodies into concrete vaults, we are forever distancing ourselves from the realities of death and decay. Then there are the related practical issues: there isn't enough land to keep burying people this way. And cremation presents environmental problems of its own.

Katie Herzog reports on an ambitious idea: a proposed human composter, which would hurry the dead along to a future as nutrient-rich soil. It's essentially a compost bin at the scale of a multistory building, with bodies on the top floor and dirt on the bottom:

> Bodies would be prepared and interned at the site, and you could hold memorial services and come back later to visit, just as you would with a traditional graveyard.
>
> Unlike a traditional graveyard, however, you could go home with your loved ones in the form of soil. You could then spread them in a garden or under a tree planted in their honor, and, [project designer Katrina] Spade says, even public parks could be fertilized with the soil, so cities would be nourished by the people who lived in them.

Hmm. That does seem like a better option than being pickled and placed in an underground vault for storage. Of course, a more traditional, natural burial also results pretty quickly in a composted body—and without the middle man. Your family doesn't have to choose someplace green to put the dirt that used to be you; your remains are already fertilizing the earth.

Herzog, however, dispenses with natural burial pretty quickly:

> There's also "green" or "natural" burial, which means a body isn't embalmed or entombed and is allowed to decompose naturally, but there aren't that many sites that allow this in the U.S., and most of them are in rural areas. For the vast majority of Americans, the choices are conventional burial or cremation.

That "most of them are in rural areas" line isn't just a journalist's dismissal of the flyover folks. The composter project is called the Urban Death Project, because it's aimed at the specific issue of human remains in densely populated areas. It's a real problem: burial takes land, which in cities can be incredibly dear. And even those of us with agrarian leanings generally acknowledge that a) urban living can be a very efficient use of natural resources, and b) in any case, cities aren't going anywhere. So a natural burial that won't work in the city will always be at best a small-scale solution and at worst an elitist one.

But is this all the natural burial movement has to offer? Burial sites that allow lower-impact practices are growing, in municipalities of varying sizes. And the movement has come to treat the "green burial" basics—no embalming, no vault, biodegradable casket if any—as a sort of minimum standard. The larger picture is land use and conservation, from prairie grounds in northern Florida to woodlands in the U.K. Conservation burial is not necessarily any more expensive than the regular kind, and even we landless urbanites have a personal stake in the preservation of natural places nearby.

What's more, some urban planners seek to recover the connection between the cemetery and public green space—with burial practices that support the local ecology and, by declining to slow decomposition, allow plots to be reused more frequently. No, most urbanites don't own property or have easy access to vast public land. But we do live in relationship with the land, thoughtfully or not. And burial practices remain a prime opportunity for improving this relationship.

To be sure, the person-composter project deals more directly and tidily with the immediate practical issue. But spiritually, we are already disconnected from the earth in so many ways. I'm not sure it helps to add this middle step, dust to fancy contraption to dust. Because it's not just about doing the least amount of quantifiable harm to the earth when we die. It's about recovering our relationship with the land on which we live.

Personally, I hope to be buried on land that has personal significance, whether private property or a conservation cemetery that’s part of a broader place I love. Yes, either option requires the existence of a personally significant spot in the first place. But that to me is part of the larger project: both a cultural recovery of a sense of rootedness and place and a political effort to make sure this is widely available. For people to have some kind of access to a place where they’d like to be buried, and the opportunity to love it enough to care.