

Fall 2015

A Final Return to Nature

Taking root, touching sky, towering above us. Trees have long been a special symbol to mankind and a central part of most creation stories told around the world. They're also a part of death, gracing cemetery lawns and standing as a living link between heaven and earth.

By Jill Draper



The Memorial Garden at Powell Gardens in Kansas City, Mo. Credit: City of Lawrence, Kan.

There's a growing movement to strengthen and celebrate that link as people look for more natural ways to remember their loved ones and to plan their own last rites.

This movement is being embraced by all generations, but baby boomers approaching their senior years are in a position to lead the way. They changed the world in terms of music, society and politics. Will they also change conservation groups and the funeral industry?

Joe Sehee thinks so. As founder of the Green Burial Council, he's helped guide a series of incremental steps in the last decade as increasing numbers of people opt for natural graves over metal caskets and concrete tombs. Now, he says the movement is poised to take a giant leap.

"Boomers are starting to think about their last act and legacy," Sehee says. "They're looking for a personal expression in line with their core values. Using burial to facilitate landscape-level conservation — not just to protect 30 acres, but 30,000 acres — is a real possibility."

With the United States population expected to increase by almost 50 percent from the year 2000 to 2050, new

subdivisions will continue to press against forests and farmland, expanding urban development at a rate, estimated in a 2002 USDA report, of more than 3 million acres a year. Sehee suggests that these tracts of land be encircled by green burial sites, and lately he's been talking with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and other state agencies about how this idea could protect large swaths of land as habitat in perpetuity.

Conservation organizations and the funeral industry have been reluctant to approach this topic, he says, even though many people are not comfortable with conventional options and find solace in a natural forest landscape. Still, he cautions about viewing green burial as a do-it-yourself opportunity.

"There's a stewardship component that's very critical — otherwise it's not doing much for the planet," Sehee says. "It's a really interesting time, and there's a lot of potential for positive outcomes if we do this properly."

Sehee acknowledges that, for some, green burials are a personal expression of their values, but, personally, he became involved from a conservation and restoration standpoint.

"We've demonstrated that this concept can work with a certain level of accountability," Sehee says. "That's why the Green Burial Council was established as a nonprofit organization."

There's a lot of work that can be done at the intersection of funerals, cemeteries and conservation, he says.

RESTING IN A MAGICAL FOREST

The city of Lawrence, Kan., looked to the Green Burial Council for guidance when officials voted in 2008 to become the first municipality to create a natural burial site at a public cemetery. Only cardboard, wooden or other eco-friendly caskets may be used, and no embalming, artificial flowers or figurines are allowed. Flat rocks or boulders may be engraved to serve as tombstones.

Mitch Young, cemetery supervisor, says the city has already sold 60 percent of the plots in a 100- by 200-foot section of Oak Hill Cemetery and is considering doubling that space.

"Very few cemeteries have wooded areas, but ours just happens to back up to undeveloped city property," Young says. The site is mowed only once a year and contains elm, Osage orange, oak and redbud trees.



Cindy Bartel drives there from the Kansas City area at least once a week. Her daughter, Makenna Rose Heaney, died two years ago on Earth Day at age 28 and lies buried beneath a redbud tree. Bartel often takes fresh flowers and her daughter's favorite coffee drink, an iced vanilla latte. She looks for butterflies near the milkweed she planted, and sometimes she notices large areas of weeds and grass matted down where deer have rested at night. She thinks Makenna would love that.

"It doesn't feel like I'm visiting a cemetery," Bartel says. "It feels like I'm a part of this peaceful, magical forest, and that helps a lot. I can just imagine her here."

A natural burial was the final wish of her daughter, who researched possibilities online after being diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. When death came, her mother, sister and best friend washed her body with rose-scented water and wrapped it in a linen shroud with sewn-in straps and handles. A special pocket near the heart held biodegradable notes, pictures and mementos. Family members,

When visiting Makenna's burial site, Bartel stands with her hands over her heart and waits for a cool breeze, a sign from her daughter, she thinks. Credit: Jill Draper.

including her father and husband, lowered the body into a pre-dug grave and used Oak Hill shovels to fill it back with soil. Afterward, they talked and told stories.

In the end, Bartel was so comforted by the process that she purchased plots for her entire family.

“It’s totally different than a conventional funeral, and much more personal,” Bartel says. “It helped so much that we could do this, and I’m so glad we did.”

ASHES IN THE WIND

A peaceful forest setting is also the attraction of a new memorial garden for scattering or burying cremated ashes east of Kansas City. The site is located at the 970-acre Powell Gardens, a Midwestern-style botanical garden with rolling hills, nature trails and various display gardens. Situated between a meadow and an oak-hickory woodland, the space features a paved path that meanders to a stone wall and a small, bubbling fountain. A prairie-style chapel designed years earlier by architect E. Fay Jones serves as a unique backdrop.

The concept of placing a memorial woodland within a botanical garden drew much interest when Eric Tschanz, executive director of Powell Gardens, described the project at a recent meeting of the American Public Gardens Association.

“It’s a service, but also a development tool,” Tschanz says. And, unlike the display gardens that need constant maintenance, the memorial garden was lightly designed with natives and wildflowers. “We feel the natural beauty of the site is all you need here.”

Roy and Lois Lovin of Lee’s Summit, Mo., were among the early backers of the new garden and have arranged to have their ashes scattered there when the time comes. Simple bronze plaques with their names and dates of birth and death will be placed on the stone wall.

“We like the rural woodland setting,” Roy Lovin says. “It’s peaceful and away from the hubbub of the city.”

But, his wife points out that their pre-arrangements go beyond an appreciation of flowers and trees.

“We fell in love with Powell Gardens 25 years ago and have watched it grow,” Lois Lovin says. “We’re happy to pay for the privilege of using the memorial garden — it’s just one of the benefits of being supporters.”

TREES IN MEMORIAL



Trees planted at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. in memory of those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. Credit: Rich Renomeron via Flickr.

Supporting reforestation efforts is another memorial option. When Marilyn Zawoyski's cousin died at age 67, she bought a tree for every year of his life as a memorial gift. It was an affordable act because the trees were seedlings purchased for a dollar apiece through the American Forests [Trees in Memory Program](#).

Zawoyski, an American Forests member in Pittsburgh, has been doing this for nearly a decade after discovering American Forests while searching online for memorial trees. When a friend or relative passes away, she writes this message on a sympathy card: "The gift of trees lives on like the memory of a person."

"I find trees to be a nice memorial gift instead of sending flowers, Zawoyski says. "And, when I found that quote, that's what really touched me. I always get a good response from the people I send them to."

LIFE AFTER DEATH

"We all like the idea of a tree; we like connecting death to life," sums up Sehee, a former Jesuit lay minister, who says the purpose of end-of-life rites is "creating space to honor the dead, heal the living and invite in the divine."

There are more than 76 million boomers in the U.S. entering their final decades. He urges them to think on a grand scale. "Let's be very visionary in deciding we want for a final resting place. The big question is what can our death do for the living?"

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