

Green Burial, Home Burial: A Return to Redbud Hill

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Article abstract

This paper uses my own personal journey toward a green home burial as a vehicle for exploring this emerging industry. A recent move across the country prompted me to reflect upon my own burial place. While I have known for years that I would prefer a green burial, the transition from my native Midwest to the Pacific Northwest was a catalyst for anxieties about leaving the familiar for a foreign (to me) landscape. Knowing that my body would one day return to the hills of my childhood provided a strange sense of calm, but a cursory look into the prospects of a home burial on my 18 acres in rural Indiana suggested the logistics were more complicated than I imagined. I learned that Indiana is one of only five states that do not allow home burial, or that have highly restrictive laws governing it. What had promised to be a simple and natural end of life decision spiraled into a bureaucratic labyrinth. Blending insights into the green burial movement with a navigation of my own experience, this paper seeks to demonstrate the environmental and personal benefits of natural burial practices while also unearthing factors that complicate its accessibility.

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Green Burial, Home Burial: A Return to Redbud Hill

Ellen M. Bayer

There is a kinship of the fields
that gives to the living the breath
of the dead. The earth
opened in the spring, opens
in all springs. Nameless,
ancient, many lived, we reach
through ages with the seed.

– Wendell Berry, “Rising”¹

In the fall of my fifth grade year, we took a field trip to a local funeral home. While the administration of this Catholic school refused to teach sex ed and help us to understand our developing bodies, they felt compelled to explain the physical death of them. We walked single file behind our teachers, excited to be outside of the classroom, but recognizing that the situation called for a certain reverence. Ushered first into the chapel, the funeral director gave an overview of his role in the grieving process. Most of us had not yet lost a family member, so his words and occupation mystified us. Moving into the showroom for caskets, one classmate whose grandmother had recently died broke down. We looked at our shoes in hushed silence as a teacher escorted her out of the room, not quite understanding her pain yet recognizing that we one day would. A friend and I inspected the pillowy softness of the caskets, their cold exterior juxtaposed with the cushy softness of the lining. I turned to her and said, “I hope they make one big enough to fit me and my horse together.”

Later that spring, my grandmother died, and it would be the first occasion for me to see a

¹Wendell Berry, “Rising,” *Collected Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 244.

human body inside one of those caskets. Those in the funeral industry refer to the embalmed body as a “memory picture,” a comforting snapshot of a loved one in sweet repose. I found it unsettling and focused on her thumbs, folded upon her chest, in order to avert my gaze from the uncanny face that did not resemble my living grandmother. Even today, the image of her that stays with me is those thumbs.

Every visitation for my deceased family members since then has been held at the same funeral home. It came to feel almost routine and predictable. We go through the motions, and the funeral director gently shepherds us through our loss. After seeing my grandmother, though, I have found ways to avoid looking at the embalmed body on display. On one occasion, I arrived late, knowing they planned to close the casket after the immediate family had said their goodbyes to an aunt; later, I would become braver and express my wish to remember the departed as they were. These avoidances elicited some grumbling, but I held firm. Watching a cousin’s casket sink into a concrete-lined vault, I was struck by the effort to prevent dust from returning to dust.

Even as a young adult, I knew this family tradition was not for me.

My family’s funerary rituals are emblematic of broader burial traditions. Each year in the United States, conventional cemeteries bury a staggering amount of hazardous, non-biodegradable materials. This includes approximately 800,000 gallons of embalming fluid; 90,000 tons of steel, 2,700 tons of copper and bronze, and 30 million board feet of hardwoods for caskets; 1,600,000 tons of reinforced concrete and 14,000 tons of steel for vaults. These numbers do not take into consideration the pesticides, fertilizers, fossil fuels, and water that the 22,500 conventional cemeteries in the US use to maintain their grounds.² Joe Sehee, founder of the Green Burial Council, provides some analogies that may help us to process these numbers: “We bury enough embalming fluid to fill eight Olympic-size swimming pools, enough metal to build the Golden Gate Bridge, and so much reinforced concrete in burial vaults that we could build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit.”³ What is most striking about these numbers is that no state or federal laws require any of these materials for the interment of human remains. Raking in \$20 billion annually, the funeral industry has done a remarkable job of selling consumers on these new norms of contemporary burial.

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, most families in the United States performed their own funerals and burials, either at home or in their church, calling on a cabinetmaker to build the

²These numbers appear in a wide number of sources. See, for example, the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Southern California’s website: <http://www.fcasocal.org/conventional-burial.html>.

³Cheryl Corley, “Burials and Cemeteries Go Green,” <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17232879>.

coffin. By mid-century, several factors converged to transform this simple practice into a profession. During the American Civil War, families of soldiers killed in battle faced the challenge of recovering the bodies for burial. Author Mark Harris notes that “spurred by the demands of grieving families, surgeons and the ‘embalming undertakers’ who learned from them now set up operations outside Civil War Battlefields and morgues, where they worked to preserve the many thousands of slain soldiers for the sole purpose of the funeral.”⁴ Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train, which displayed his embalmed body to the viewing public over the course of its two week journey, served to further popularize the practice, and embalming - once opposed by most Americans - quickly secured its place in funerary traditions.⁵ The metal casket also debuted at this time, appealing to consumers for its ability to withstand the elements while also being aesthetically pleasing. The burial vault appeared in tandem with metal caskets, offering further protection from the elements and grave robbers, as well as helping to maintain the stability of cemetery grounds.⁶ And so emerged the new traditional funeral and burial.

As more Americans look for ways to leave a lighter footprint on the planet, the contemporary funeral industry finds itself forced to evolve in response. Up until relatively recently, what we term green, or natural, burial was known simply as burial. The green burial movement continues to gain momentum as a more economically and environmentally sound alternative to “traditional” burial. The Green Burial Council (GBC) was founded in 2005 to establish standards for this growing movement. The GBC defines green burial as follows: “Green, or natural, burial is a way of caring for the dead with minimal environmental impact that aids in the conservation of natural resources, reduction of carbon emissions, protection of worker health, and the restoration and/or preservation of habitat. Green burial necessitates the use of non-toxic and biodegradable materials, such as caskets, shrouds, and urns.”⁷ This translates into three core principles: the corpse cannot be embalmed with toxic chemicals (although non-toxic, biodegradable fluids are permitted); only caskets, shrouds, or urns made from biodegradable materials are permitted; and the use of grave liners or vaults is prohibited.

As with any consumer product, there are varying shades of green. The GCB attempts to regulate this through its rating system for green funeral homes, cemeteries, and products. The GBC notes that its list of certified providers in North America “has grown from 1 in 2006 to

⁴Mark Harris, *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 45.

⁵Ibid., 46.

⁶Ibid., 43.

⁷Green Burial Council, “What is Green Burial?”, <http://greenburialcouncil.org/home/what-is-green-burial>.

more than [sic] 340 today.”⁸ Even the National Funeral Directors Association provides information for its members about how to meet the rising demand for green products and services, albeit from an industry- and market-focused perspective.

The GBC categorizes green cemeteries into three groups: hybrid, natural, and conservation burial grounds. The Hybrid Burial Ground earns a One-Leaf Rating and is defined as “conventional cemeteries offering the options for burial without the need for a vault..., a vault lid, concrete box, slab, or partitioned liner. Hybrid Burial Grounds shall not require the embalming of decedents and must allow for any kind of eco-friendly burial containers including shrouds.”⁹ Most hybrid cemeteries that I examined set aside a small area for green burials, which typically adjoins the conventional cemetery grounds. Natural Burial Grounds earn a Two-Leaf Rating and “require the adoption of practices/protocols that are energy-conserving, minimize waste, and do not require the use of toxic chemicals.”¹⁰ They also prohibit “the use of vaults..., vault lids, concrete boxes, slabs or partitioned liners” as well as “burial containers not made from natural/plant derived materials.”¹¹ They “must have in place a program of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and be designed, operated and maintained to produce a naturalistic appearance, based on the use of plants and materials native to the region, and patterns of landscape derived from and compatible with regional ecosystems.”¹² “Conservation Burial Grounds, in addition to meeting all the requirements for a Natural Burial Ground, must further legitimate land conservation. It must protect in perpetuity an area of land specifically and exclusively designated for conservation. [It] must involve an established conservation organization that holds a conservation easement or has in place a deed restriction guaranteeing long-term stewardship.”¹³

When it opened in South Carolina in 1998, Ramsey Creek was the first conservation cemetery in the U.S. The images in its online gallery provide a sense of the simplicity of the gravesites and showcase the natural beauty of the burial grounds. The owners of Ramsey Creek take exceptional care in maintaining and fostering the local ecosystem. In opening a grave, staff carefully remove plants from the site without causing harm, separate the various layers of soil, and replace everything in its original state when closing the grave. As per the norms for natural

⁸Green Burial Council, “Find a Provider,” <http://greenburialcouncil.org/find-a-provider>.

⁹Green Burial Council, “Burial Grounds Standards/Eco-Rating System,” http://greenburialcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CemeteryIntroInfo-Hybrid_Nat_Cons.pdf.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

burial, Ramsey Creek permits planting only native plants or trees on a gravesite and allows, at most, a flat local fieldstone as a marker. Most green cemeteries use GPS tracking systems to locate and keep track of graves and to allow visitors to find their location.

To accompany these green burials, an entire industry has sprouted up, offering a range of green products, which the GBC also rates. While some families choose to build their own caskets, you can also find entire websites devoted to an array of options, from the simple pine box that requires assembly to more elaborate - and costly - models made from various plant-based materials. Urns are also popular, and you can find anything from a water biodegradable model made from Himalayan salt to an earth biodegradable model made from cornstarch. While a simple cotton sheet would suffice, consumers can find an array of shrouds, from organic cotton with convenient carrying straps to chic silk wraps. Many consumers turn to green burial for its cost-effectiveness, but the quality and choice of burial accessories available make it quite possible to run up the cost of a green burial to numbers that resemble the cost of a conventional one.

I recall telling my father at age twelve - years before I encountered Whitman's directive to "look for me under your bootsoles"¹⁴ - that I liked the idea of my body nurturing the growth of grasses that would eventually be grazed by horses and deer. An agnostic at a young age, I explained that this seemed to me the ideal sort of "afterlife." It wasn't until 22 years later, while teaching Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, that I gave my own burial any serious thought.

During our class discussions of Addie Bundren's desire to be hauled back to her hometown of Jefferson, Mississippi for burial, I began to think about my own final wishes. At the time, I was in a non-tenure-track faculty position at a liberal arts school in Indiana, each year waiting anxiously to see if my contract would be renewed. Perpetually on the job market, I didn't know where the next academic year would find me. Perhaps a need for control over some aspect of my life fueled these admittedly morbid thoughts. Reflecting after class one day, the idea of being buried in the rural Indiana landscape where I had spent much of my childhood took hold of my imagination.

My father and I co-own 17 undeveloped acres of Whitewater River Valley hillside. I spent my youth exploring that land, its steep stands of oak; clay-lined Snail Creek and the sycamores shading its banks; and the clearings edged with redbud trees, their purple-pink blooms my favorite sign of spring. When my beloved horse Whisper died, we buried him there, and I planted a redbud on his grave. This was my place. A tremendous sense of relief consumed me; I

¹⁴Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1959), 86.

was genuinely thrilled with the prospect of returning to this particular piece of land. Forget the casket large enough to accommodate a horse and a human; just wrap me in a shroud and place me by his side.

This whimsical idea grew in force as, a year later, I accepted a tenure track position over 2,000 miles away in Washington State. The move intimidated me, especially the change of landscape. While eastern Indiana doesn't have the jaw-dropping scenery of the Pacific Northwest, I was nevertheless anxious about leaving the familiarity of my native Midwest. There would be new flora and fauna to learn, and I would say goodbye to the species I knew well - tulip trees and redbuds; cardinals and the titmouse; lightning bugs and cicadas. The prospect of making an eventual return to a landscape that felt like home, even if only as a corpse, gave me a sense of comfort and helped me cope with the anxieties of the move.

Weeks before my departure, I conducted a farewell drive around the area, culminating in a stop at my planned gravesite on what I had come to call Redbud Hill. Years earlier, someone cleared the lower third of the hill for cattle to graze, and our horses later roamed this rocky pasture. With livestock having been absent for some time, the land was now remaking itself. Sycamore saplings outcompeted weeds, and the redbuds continued to expand their border. An old oak tree, struck by lightning decades ago and every year surely its last, continued to loom at the edge of the tree line. Reassured by this visit and the promise of a home burial, I headed west.

I would have maintained this daydream had I not returned to the topic in my writing.

As I soon learned, home burial is prohibited in three states: California, Indiana, and Washington. As per Indiana Code, human remains must be buried in an established cemetery. To complicate matters further, a funeral director must be involved in the process; only a funeral director can sign the death certificate, and he must witness the burial in order to do so.¹⁵ Even if you forego a funeral - which is my wish - immediate burial in Indiana still requires the services of a funeral director, which can cost anywhere between \$1410 and \$2540.¹⁶ My research indicated that creating a family cemetery on private land wasn't a viable option, as established cemeteries in Indiana must have a \$100,000 maintenance trust fund.¹⁷ A southern Indiana

¹⁵See Indiana General Assembly, Indiana Code IC 25-15-8-25, "Issuance of permit under 16-37-3-10," State Board of Funeral and Cemetery Service, July 1, 2015, http://www.in.gov/pla/files/SBFCS_July_1_2015_EDITION%281%29.pdf. See also Lisa Carlson and Joshua Slocum, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death* (Hinesburg, VT: Upper Access, Inc., 2011), 250-257.

¹⁶See, for example, the following Indiana funeral homes' price lists to get a sense of the range of the cost for immediate burial: Indiana Funeral Care and Crematory, <http://indianafuneralcare.com/straighttalk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/20140604-Indiana-General-Price-List.pdf>; and Porter, Oliger, Pearson Funeral Home and Cremation Service, http://www.popfuneralhome.com/home/index.cfm/services/pricelist/fh_id/12044.

¹⁷See Indiana General Assembly, Indiana Code IC 23-14-48, Chapter 48, "Cemetery Perpetual Care Fund," 2015,

woman, Betty Blaker, had recently come up against this when she attempted to bury her husband, at his request, in a simple pine coffin on their 10 acres. While she could have scattered his ashes there with no problems, she would have committed a Class C felony had she buried her husband's body there. She offered to donate the land to the county to be used as a green cemetery, but she met with resistance and insistence on the \$100,000 fee.¹⁸

And so I leaped into the rabbit hole, and my quest to obtain the right to my own green home burial soon became an obsession fueled by a strong sense of panic and urgency. For a healthy woman in her mid-30s, my fixation on this topic was, admittedly, a bit unusual. Even while I recognized this, I was moved by a powerful need to regain that sense of calm that knowing my final resting place had initially instilled.

Foxfield Nature Preserve Cemetery in Ohio became my first alternative. Like Ramsey Creek, it is a conservation burial ground. In addition to its burial practices, I was drawn to the landscape itself. Having divided my time between Indiana and Ohio throughout my young life, Foxfield's Midwestern prairie and forest was familiar and comforting. It seemed like a viable alternative to home burial; that is, until I considered the environmental impact of shipping human remains cross-country.

Working on the assumption that I would live out the rest of my days in Washington, I explored local options and found White Eagle Nature Preserve Cemetery. With its Ponderosa pine forests and sweeping vistas, White Eagle is certainly a beautiful place, but I nevertheless had a sharp response in my gut. It simply didn't look like home. The possibility that I could potentially live in Washington longer than I had lived in the Midwest, that the Washington landscape may one day come to feel like home, didn't register. I flipped back to the images of Foxfield, and I could physically feel the difference in my body's response. Shifting to photos of Redbud Hill, it was clear that I had a deep-seated desire for my body to one day nourish the redbud tree that stood on my horse's grave.

Back down the rabbit hole I went, now contemplating turning my 17 acres into a conservation burial ground. I would reach out to others in the field as consultants, perhaps even fly them in to survey the land and discuss logistics. As I write this, I recognize the level of absurdity to which my thinking had progressed, but, in the moment, it felt very important. While earlier

<https://iga.in.gov/legislative/laws/2015/ic/titles/023>.

¹⁸The Associated Press, "Indiana widow fights state law on home burial," *Washington Times Herald*, May 30, 2011, https://www.washtimesherald.com/news/indiana-widow-fights-state-law-on-home-burial/article_2d686ef3-76f1-5d71-be06-18f8eeee9d0b.html.

anxieties about my career were soothed by my new job, I had recently broken my ankle and depended on my partner for completing the most basic of tasks for me, and my cat of 16 years, Dexter, was diagnosed with renal lymphoma. Once again, that need for control over something spurred me on.

Pouring through books on green burial and funeral rights, one sentence in Lisa Carlson and Joshua Slocum's book, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*, gave me new hope. In their chapter on Indiana, the authors suggest that some towns or counties might not be so strict with the \$100,000 maintenance trust fund and that one should avoid mentioning it in any inquiries into establishing a family cemetery.¹⁹ I had abandoned plans to call the county after conducting my initial research, but this led me to follow up to see what they would say. I spoke with a staff member in the county Area Planning office, and she very casually explained how easy it would be to establish a family cemetery on my property. When I pressed her and asked if there are any fees associated with this beyond the \$300 Conditional Use Permit fee, she told me (twice) that there are not. She proceeded to read off the procedure for obtaining the permit - a fairly simple and straightforward process that involves requesting the permit, paying the fee, and notifying the owners of neighboring properties of my intention. The Area Planning staff member reversed in minutes what I had spent months agonizing over. Thinking of Betty Blaker, a quick search revealed that she had since won her own victory, and the county granted her permission to bury her husband on their property, which she will donate as a green cemetery. I was jubilant.

To my surprise, this feeling subsided rather quickly. My thoughts have now returned to the environmental impact of transporting human remains across the country by air, to the financial cost of such an endeavor, and to the emotional burden of such a request on whoever attends to this on my behalf. How green would such a burial be? Perhaps simply knowing that a burial at Redbud Hill is possible is enough to provide the security I need because the issue suddenly feels less urgent. From the pinewood writing desk in my new home, I glimpse the snow-capped summit of Mount Tahoma peeking over the Douglas firs and Sitka spruces that stand sentry throughout the neighborhood. Broken ankle now fully mended, I will spend the weekend running through the Central Cascades Range, our acquaintance growing into fast friendship. As I write, Dexter purrs and curls in my lap, his chemo holding the cancer at bay. This place has gripped me in ways I hadn't fathomed. I feel moved to let go of my burial quest, to leave the matter for the future, and to live fully in the present moment, finding elements of home in any landscape.

¹⁹Lisa Carlson and Joshua Slocum, *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death* (Hinesburg, VT: Upper Access, Inc., 2011), 250-257.



View from the author's proposed gravesite on Redbud Hill.