

Green Burial Information 12-3-09

Here is some information — and some URLs for even more information — about green burial, gathered by John Gilpin and shared with Mariellen Gilpin in answer to some fact-finding done by Dennis Darling, a Springfield Friend. Dennis learned from a local funeral director that green burial is only legal if the entire gravesite is covered with a concrete slab. This seems to be a scam, a widely-shared one, but nonetheless not a legal requirement. Notice the information below from our Jewish friend Al Avner, who is on the burial committee for the Champaign-Urbana Temple. Jewish religious observance requires "green" burial, and so there is very, very good precedent for getting what you want.

Also included is some information about donating bodies to medical science.

It is good if the worship group could set up a burial committee to make the arrangements for the family. It is Not Good for the family to make the arrangements with a funeral home...the funeral industry really works the family member's raw feelings, and all that adds up to a big bill. Send somebody outside the family to do the arrangements.

Some relevant websites:

<http://naturalburial.coop/canada/about-natural-burial-cooperative/>

<http://www.grist.org/article/dicum2/>

<http://www.genesislegacy.org/about-genesis.htm>

<http://www.genesislegacy.org/donors-family.htm>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/01/AR2006070101215.html>

http://www.zoominfo.com/people/Dahlby_Mark_691190553.aspx

<http://naturalburial.coop/>

These are from several-year-old sources (some URLs John Gilpin had no longer even work). A short session with Google could bring up lots of newer stuff.

Some other stuff:

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The Conservation Burial standards help land trusts and other groups use a combination of Natural Burial certification and conservation easements to further their stewardship mission. The Green Burial Council — which includes a board member who's a senior vice president at the Trust for Public Land — believes certification has the potential to

not only bring in revenue, but also to help ensure that land remains protected. "Burial is another layer of protection," Sehee says. "It consecrates the land and offers another barrier to development."

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Friends would find the option of body donation through Genesis Legacy attractive because it appears to enable a person to depart this world in a way that:

- Reduces to an absolute minimum the number of decisions and actions that must be done by the family at a time of stress. If a person is enrolled (simple and free), one phone call does it. If not, a phone call plus filling out the forms.
- Reduces associated expense essentially to zero. No casket, embalming, viewing, cemetery lot, monument, etc. Not even transportation or a crematory fee. No expense (flowers, etc) for mourners. Money not spent on funeral stuff is available for good works.
- Contributes something useful to medical training and research
- Allows local organ donation beforehand.
- Permits final cremated remains to be returned (or not, as desired).
- Pays the cost of body transportation to the Genesis Legacy site – other body donation services require the donator's family to pay the (considerable) cost of transportation.

The package would seem attractive enough to make a Meeting committee want to check out the facts for themselves and (assuming a positive result) take action to educate members and attenders, both now and in the future, about the availability of the option and the means for taking advantage of it.

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Also from John:

. . .Dennis Darling reports that Butler Funeral Home in Springfield does green burial (at Roselawn Cemetery only, I presume) that is certified by Green Burial Council (bamboo casket, no embalming), but they still have to cover the site with a concrete slab to satisfy Illinois cemetery regulations. . .

John Gilpin is fairly certain this is wrong, although lots of people believe it. The legal requirement is 18" of dirt. But at any rate, not a slab or vault. But of course for certainty there would need to be a legal opinion. John found the following from Al Avner, a knowledgeable local person who serves on the burial committee of the Champaign-Urbana Jewish temple.

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The main goals of the traditional Jewish burial are (1) simplicity, so the richest person is buried in the same fashion as the poorest, and (2) rapid return of the remains to the earth

(hence no embalming of the body and no metal or other long-lasting components in the coffin). In Israel that often means burial directly in the ground with nothing more than a shroud to cover the body. However modern U.S. cemetery practices and laws rarely permit that degree of simplicity. It is almost impossible to get by without a coffin and difficult to avoid the grave liner. All but a few of the country cemeteries require a liner to prevent the ground from subsiding when the coffin collapses. [Note implication that a liner is a matter of cemetery policy, not law. --JBG] Traditional Jewish burials use a liner that is concrete with holes to allow water to enter. That at least hastens breakdown of the wood in the coffin.

When you consider the total energy cost of construction and transport of even the most simple liner and coffin, cremation with scattering or burial of ashes begins to look like the most cost effective way to go. Though cremation is contrary to European Jewish tradition, the Jewish section of Mt. Hope (cemetery in Urbana) has several. If the "cremains" are placed in direct contact with the earth rather than within an urn that is within a mini-liner, at least part of the goal of Jewish burial is achieved. We usually get a claim from each new cemetery manager that burial of ashes without an urn and liner is "not legal" (it certainly is not very profitable for them). We then gently explain that (1) direct contact with the soil is a religious requirement for us, and (2) that they may be thinking of the laws about regular burials since Illinois State law does permit direct burial of cremains (in fact, as far as the law is concerned, "burial" has taken place at the time of cremation and the cremains may be disposed of in any fashion that does not violate private property rights -- I can't plant Great Aunt Susy's ashes in my neighbors' front yard without his permission, but it is certainly OK to plant her in my own front yard or under the turf in a cemetery plot for which I own burial rights).

Of course one other way to reduce (or at least delay) the final energy cost is to donate as many organs and as much tissue as possible at your death for re-use in other humans.

Organ donation allows you to meet an even more important goal of good Jewish life, the saving of the lives of others, and is permitted by all branches of Judaism and encouraged by most.

The Jewish community owns a part of Mt. Hope cemetery outright. The land is maintained by Mt Hope (Urbana) which is reimbursed by income from an "endowed care" trust fund ("perpetual care" is a term that is no longer permitted in cemetery advertising). Burial rights are sold at replacement cost by a volunteer committee that also provides free advice and guidance to families at the time of a death.

Grave markers are present for most graves. Under Eastern European Jewish tradition, the grave of an infant who lived for less than 30 days need not be marked. Most families do not mark a grave until a year after the burial (another Eastern European Jewish tradition) and a few families choose not to mark graves. Burials of persons who were unable to pay for the cost of their burial are marked by monuments bought by the community (which also covers the expense of their funeral and burial).

Several (probably unintended) purposes are served by the monuments that are especially pleasing to me. First, they provide a history of the local Jewish community that is not otherwise available (the community is actually a continually changing amalgamation of sub-communities), and second, they serve as the tops of the burrows of many families of ground squirrels.

(end of notes from Al Avner)

Another note from John Gilpin:

The part in Dennis Darling's original note about bamboo caskets. Green burial does not require bamboo. (Green burial does not require ANY casket.) Caskets made of bamboo tend to be fancy and pricey. If it's "required" by the cemetery or funeral director, it's just another scam.

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A first level of green burial is already substantially available: One can already bury without embalming or cosmetology, with minimal casket and grave marker, and with no grave liner, or at least one that doesn't retard body/casket decomposition. All this is already available, and in fact, apparently fairly common. All Funeral Consumers Association (FCA) needs to do here is to spread the word, perhaps also with some education about the optional character of the services of a funeral director (which, though related, is orthogonal to green burial – some, perhaps most, users of green burial will choose to have a funeral director handle some or all of the arrangements). In point of fact, all this isn't far from a statement of FCA's longtime mission as I understand it.

The second level of green burial is where most of the plot fee goes to environmental restoration and maintenance. This is the new dimension, which needs to be established, both in people's minds and in actual availability, as an option. It's also where many questions will arise: Will my grandchildren be able to find my grave? Will the local history embodied (oops, excuse the pun!) in regular cemeteries be obscured or even lost in green burial cemeteries? Will some animal dig me up? After a few years, will someone else be buried in my same place? Will green burial be available locally in the foreseeable future? How much will it cost? Etc.

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