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## Grave Concerns

Hoping to preserve land and protect the environment, even in death, more and more people are choosing to be buried in community nature sanctuaries where the hallowed ground and pristine wilderness combine to form a compelling alternative to traditional cemeteries.

by Elisabeth Nadin

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There is a lingering, tangible way the world changes after the death of a loved one. Memories become more vivid. Places where thoughts, feelings, and cherished moments were shared take on deeper meaning. So it follows naturally that we would want the burial site to be similarly special—a sacred setting in which the relationship can endure, at least in spirit.



Ramsey Creek Preserve. Photo courtesy of Memorial Ecosystems

For Sharon Brown, this place is Ramsey Creek Preserve, a thirty-two-acre plot of old-growth woods in Westminster, South Carolina. Her son Chris was buried there in a simple pine box after succumbing to colon cancer at the age of twenty-eight. It was in these woods, Brown says, that she found the courage and grace to deal with her son's death last May. "I felt the spirit of Chris was already there because he loved

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that place,” she says.

Chris had personally requested the burial site because “he had taken from nature and he wanted his body to return back to the Earth—without the embalming fluids,” says Brown. “It’s through giving that you receive, and my son felt that giving to the Earth was a way to come back to it again.”

While some people prefer the traditions and stateliness embodied by a modern cemetery, others find this rendition of a burial ground to be sterile, spiritually vacant, and in conflict with their environmental leanings. And with the Cremation Association of North America reporting a huge rise in cremations— from four percent to nearly thirty percent over the last fifty years—it’s apparent that a growing number of people are seeking alternatives to modern cemetery burial.

These are the people Dr. Billy Campbell, a South Carolina physician and owner of Ramsey Creek, is thinking of when he offers his land for “green” burials—a natural, environmentally sensitive option that bans metal caskets, concrete vaults, and toxic embalming fluids. Campbell believes funeral homes take advantage of people’s grief in order to sell them expensive services, and he appeals to the top two reasons cited by those who choose cremation: lower expenses and land conservation.

“If you come to Ramsey Creek, it’s a walk in the woods. You wouldn’t even know you were in a cemetery,” says Campbell. “You see trees fallen, butterflies in the air, metallic green damselflies with black wings, pit-mound topography. It looks like an old-growth forest. And that’s different from being on the side of the road in a casket.” Ramsey Creek is more than a burial site; it is a nature park where anyone can visit and learn about indigenous animals and plants. It is, as Campbell calls it, a “community nature sanctuary.”

Because laws protect cemeteries from future development, turning these sanctuaries into burial grounds is a means of preserving wilderness. Since opening Ramsey Creek for burials in 1996, Campbell has worked hard to preserve more pristine wilderness. He helped John Wilkerson open the Glendale Memorial Nature Preserve, a 350-acre longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystem in Florida’s panhandle. And a recent partnership with cemetery owner and operator Forever Enterprises will soon result in the dedication of sixteen pristine acres of an existing forty-acre cemetery in Marin County, California, to natural, low-density burial.

These partnerships will test the response of both the funeral industry and the green burial market. “When you innovate, you have to know from within what you are changing,” says Forever Enterprises president Tyler Cassity. He considers Ramsey Creek a strong prototype because, although it has seen only twenty burials to date, people from as far away as California have sent remains of their loved ones to the site in the deep South and forty more plots have been purchased in advance.

But Campbell thinks the appeal of natural burial lies deeper: in our universal yearning for simplicity and a connection to nature. “Even people you would not identify as environmentalists, they’ve always loved the woods,” he says. “You come to see this site as sacred, no matter what you think about nature.”

In the unmanicured woods of Ramsey Creek, native, wild plants flower and fade with the seasons. Burials are limited to 100 per acre, in contrast to the average of about 1,000 per acre in a modern cemetery. The dirt from a gravesite is carefully extracted, preserving the soil profile, and then replaced above the body, which can be buried in a simple, untreated cardboard or wooden box, or no box at all. As the body decays, the burial mound settles back to level. Ramsey Creek allows an engraved flat stone from the property to be lain flat over the burial site, but even unmarked gravesites are easily located with modern-day global positioning systems.

By contrast, modern cemeteries seem toxic. Based on statistics compiled from the Casket and Funeral Supply Association of America, the Cremation Association of North America, and the Rainforest Action Network, environmental writer Mary Woodsen estimates 827,060 gallons of embalming fluid—enough to fill nearly four Olympic-sized swimming pools—are entombed each year in America’s 22,500 cemeteries. Along with approximately 2.3 million bodies, we bury 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete that go into vaults, as well as 104,272 tons of steel and 2,700 tons of copper and bronze in the form of caskets. Then there are the 30 million board feet of precious hardwoods that are buried annually.

All of this comes at a cost. A no-frills burial in a modern cemetery generally runs more than \$6,000. “Funerals are a \$26 billion-a-year industry,” Campbell says. “There are better things we can do with that money.” A green burial at Ramsey Creek costs around \$2,500, still a somewhat hefty price tag.

The idea of preserving land, however, is what drew Bonnie Raney, who buried her husband at Ramsey Creek and bought herself a plot there as well. In her eighty-one years, she's seen the land around her overrun by buildings and parking lots. "It might seem like a drop in the bucket, but every little bit you can take from real estate developers is worth it to me," she says in a deep Southern drawl.

Babs McDonald and her husband Ken Cordell, both research scientists with the Forest Service in Athens, Georgia, also felt that buying plots at Ramsey Creek presented an opportunity to stem the fragmentation and development of land—and for McDonald, the opportunity to return something to the Earth. "I feel like the Earth has given so much to me and the proper thing is for me to give back, in my life and through my life, but also in death," she says. "I want to provide that meal for all the little critters." Eventually, she hopes, her remains will become a part of other living things.

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