

Body Talk

“What will happen to our bodies after we die?” It’s not the easiest conversation to begin, but a meaningful and important one.

BY JAMIE SARCHE

Our society is learning to talk about difficult things, yet some taboos just don’t seem to budge. We’re trying to talk about racism, misogyny, the rapidly changing climate—and yet, people still refuse to talk about the one thing we all have in common: death.

When people find out I help people plan their funerals, more often than not, they say, “I have the weirdest question.” Honestly, the questions are rarely weird. It’s just that people don’t let themselves think about death. I say, things only get easier to talk about the more we talk about them. So, let’s talk! In this article, I’ll describe what happens to our bodies when we die: the different options for memorial and burial.

Why this “morbid” subject? When we have our plans in place for the disposition of our bodies after we die, we provide a path for our loved ones to walk on; we give them the chance to integrate their emotions and start to create a new normal. So many people tell me they don’t need a funeral. Maybe they think it’s egotistical to expect a funeral or memorial service after they’re gone. Maybe they don’t want to make a big deal out of their death. Well...death is a big deal, and the ones we leave behind after we die need the chance to mourn. Having the structure of ritual and familiar ceremony, whatever form it may take, is absolutely vital to processing loss.

Traditional Disposition

There are many methods of disposition, and people choose a method based on a number of factors, including tradition, finances, and environmental impact. Two traditional methods are burial and fire cremation. Alkaline hydrolysis and body composting are newer and, for now, readily available in only a few states.

No matter what your choice of disposition, now is the time to make the plans with a funeral home, long before they are needed. By doing so, you remove many burdens from the people who love you.

Let's start with definitions. At a funeral, the body is present during a service; at a memorial service, sometimes called a celebration of life, the body is not present. You're probably familiar with what's often referred to as traditional burial, which can include embalming to allow for a public visitation, a casket made from metal, wood, or both, and a vault, or grave liner.

What *is* embalming? Embalming involves draining and replacing the blood with a different fluid which slows decomposition and allows the mortician to make repairs to the body if necessary (Funeral Consumers Alliance, n.d.). They can adjust someone's skin color, add filling if someone became drawn during an extended illness, put things back together after an accident. It's a little gruesome, and the *only* reason to embalm is if the family *wants* to or if the body will go into a mausoleum at a cemetery that requires it. You might hear that embalming is required for transportation across state lines. It's not, nor is it required for international transportation, though an airline might require a sealed casket.

Traditional burial is definitely a problem for the environment. The casket and vault take a lot of

resources to make, and they do not biodegrade. As the body decomposes, the embalming fluid leaks into the ground, and it can be highly toxic and carcinogenic (Congressional Cemetery, 2017).

Fire cremation (often known simply as "cremation") is becoming more and more popular. To cremate, the body is typically placed in a cardboard container or cremation casket. The container is placed into a retort, an oven with an open flame. The body is left in the 1,800-degree fire for a couple of hours. The tissue is incinerated, leaving only the bones, which at this point are filled with the toxic fuel used by the retort. The bones are processed in a cremulator. What we often think of as ash is actually ground-up bone (Cremation Institute, 2022). If you look in an urn, you will most likely see some bone fragments.

Many choose cremation because they've heard it's cheaper, and that can be true! There are storefront crematories who do it for as little as \$600. I wouldn't recommend using them, but they exist. Unfortunately, Colorado, where I live and work, has been home to a crematory scandal or two (Traub, 2022). To find a reputable company, be sure to ask friends for recommendations and check online reviews. Expect to pay two to three thousand dollars.

As with each burial option, there are benefits and drawbacks to cremation, and these can be difficult to understand. Often people say they want cremation because it will be more convenient for their families. They don't want to burden their loved ones by forcing them to have a funeral or memorial service within a certain amount of time. They don't want to obligate their family to visit a cemetery. They think they are doing something good for their loved ones.

Of course, I don't know what's best for every family. However, in the 13 years I've been doing this work, I've found that people benefit from having some ritual right away. When someone dies, the bereaved can be in a kind of limbo. A communal event helps people to turn the corner and start making the journey forward.

Often when families cremate, they don't make plans for what to do with the cremains. Unless they are given instruction, many people have no idea what to do with them. Scattering the remains appeals to many families, but it can often seem empty without some sort of ritual around it.

Have you seen *The Big Lebowski*? Remember that scene in which they dump the cremated remains out of the coffee can, and the wind picks up and they get smacked in the face with the ashes? Believe it or not, I've talked to a lot of people who have had that exact experience: the importance and significance of the

moment reduced to something absurd and unfulfilling. And it's hard to just throw ashes away, so even the urn itself can feel like a burden. A final resting place—a cemetery, under a tree, a bench—allows the loved ones to have a place to go if they ever need it.

Individuals often choose cremation because they worry that we're running out of space. People tend to believe fire cremation is environmentally friendly, but the reality is that the environmental impact of a cremation is much greater than the space it saves in the ground. In fact, the retort uses *as much fossil fuel as a cross country car trip* (Barton Family Funeral Service, n.d.). The smoke from the retort goes up into the atmosphere, as do the heavy metals and toxins in the body—even mercury from fillings in the teeth. Those toxins come back down as acid rain. Burning the bones removes all the nutrients from them, and because they are filled with fossil fuels, burnt remains can be toxic to plants.

Greener Alternatives

People are increasingly looking for burial options with a smaller carbon footprint. One choice is green burial. It's an environmentally sustainable way to care for a body, and, I would argue, the gentlest. With green burial, there is no embalming. The body is dressed in organic clothing (often a shroud). A biodegradable casket is used, or maybe there is no casket at all. And even if the cemetery requires a liner to hold the ground up, the casket can be placed in the ground to go back to the earth (Vatomsky, 2018). With green burial, the dead are tucked into the earth, becoming compost within a short time to feed and nurture it.

Burying our loved one, taking them from where they *are* to where they *need to be*, can be a healing experience when we mourn. We shovel dirt into the grave feeling the depth of the loss, which helps move the grief out of our bodies. And having a place to go, a marker to visit our loved one after they're gone, can be a healing thing, too.

People often ask about the "mushroom suit" (Rhim Lee, 2011), a burial suit laced with the spores of mushrooms that eat the toxins present in human bodies. It's certainly an intriguing idea, but it's not necessary for a green burial. The body's gut bacteria are enough to catalyze the decomposition. Seth Viddal, who works in sustainable death care, came up with a great analogy: the mushroom suit is like wearing a foam finger at a football game. It's exciting and fun, but it doesn't affect the outcome!

Alkaline hydrolysis, also known as "aquamation" or "water cremation," is another way to reduce the body

to bones. The body is placed in a vessel with water and an alkali similar to liquid soap (BioSAFE Life Science Solutions, n.d.). In a couple of hours, the tissue decomposes and the bones are processed into something we might call ash. Here in Denver, the remaining solution is donated to a flower farm. There are no emissions, and the remains are filled with nutrients, so they actually function as a fertilizer. Alkaline hydrolysis is the real version of what people wrongly think fire cremation is (Oster, 2022).

Before he died in December of 2021, Archbishop Desmond Tutu chose alkaline hydrolysis. He had a public funeral with his body in a plain pine box to give the community a chance to mourn beforehand (Berger, 2022) His funeral got alkaline hydrolysis a lot of press!

The newest method of disposition is known in legislation as "natural organic reduction" (Colorado General Assembly, 2020). It's also referred to as "body composting." Remember when we talked about green burial? That is composting in the ground, in a cemetery. Body composting happens in a facility rather than in a cemetery. The body is placed in a vessel filled with organic material: a four to one ratio of organics to the body weight. There's great airflow to facilitate decomposition. About midway through, the bones are put through a processor to make them smaller, so they decompose, too. In a few months, everything transforms to soil.

Have the Conversation

No matter what your choice of disposition, now is the time to make the plans with a funeral home, long before they are needed. By doing so, you remove many burdens from the people who love you. They will not have to make the myriad decisions or provide information when they are least able to think. They will avoid the chaos and dysfunction that so many families encounter when they are in the depth of shock and grief.

If you pre-pay, you save your family that stress, too. States have different laws about pre-payment for these kinds of services. In many states, including Colorado, the funeral home uses a special insurance product to fund the plan. That typically allows you to get today's prices for services long in the future. If you'd like to be able to pay over time, you can do so. And, if you die while making payments, there is an insurance component that will pay off the balance. Costs vary widely between disposition options, and from state to state, but they are substantial and worth considering ahead of time.

I have always been very open with my children

about illness and death. We've even talked about what they would want if, God forbid, they needed serious medical treatment and couldn't speak on their own behalf. Both my sons signed power of attorney documents when they turned 18. My husband and I have all our paperwork in order, too. We've had so many conversations over the years and will continue to do so as we age and our health situation changes.

It might seem really scary to talk about illness and death. You might be afraid that if you talk about it, you'll bring it on. You might be afraid that if you open the door with someone who is ill or bereaved, you'll make them feel worse. These are common fears.

A client of mine named Joanne really wanted her parents to put funeral plans in place. She was so afraid to bring up the subject. She worried that if she did, her parents would think she wanted them to die. I promised her that talking about it doesn't make anything happen and encouraged her to just try. When she did, her mom was so grateful. She had wanted to talk about it too, but she was worried bringing it up would scare her daughter.

A few years ago, we witnessed a perfect example of what I'm talking about. Senator John McCain had glioblastoma: a terrible, and terminal, kind of brain cancer. Everyone talked about him as a warrior. In his case, it was literally true. As you know, Senator McCain was a prisoner of war for more than five years. He was a strong, courageous man. He lived as well as anyone could while in treatment. He talked openly about his illness. He planned his funeral, even choosing the people he wanted to give eulogies and be pallbearers (CNN, 2022). He continued to set an example in so many ways. When he had enough, he ended his treatment and died.

Have these hard conversations. Though the discussions will feel awkward at first, I hope you will find that the more you do it, the easier it becomes. By talking openly about death, you will be teaching others to do the same. And maybe, by having these deep and meaningful conversations, when you inevitably have to face the death of someone you love, you will be able to do so with fewer regrets.

You know, things are a lot scarier in the dark. When you turn on the lights, you will find you are stronger and braver than you thought. •CSA



Jamie Sarche's calling is helping people be less afraid of death. By arranging for them to provide their loved ones with a planned and funded funeral or memorial service, she helps them create a path for bereavement, long before it's needed. And by facing their mortal-

ity, her clients can live better, more meaningful lives. A seasoned speaker, she brings deep experience in death care to a broad range of audiences around the country, sharing insights and approaches on how to have those difficult conversations and how to address sensitive issues. Reach her at 720-404-6772 or jamie.sarche@gmail.com.

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