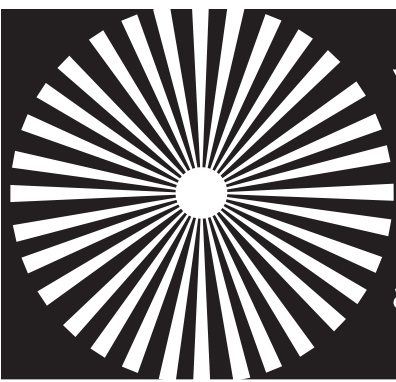
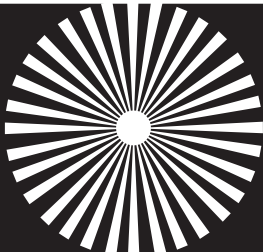




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BY SARAH MAZZE



Dust to Dust

Former Slug Queen composts the dead.

In the fog of grief, even the most environmentally conscious may not do their research.

The funeral industry buries toxins and natural resources along with our loved ones in the form of wood, fiberglass, concrete and metal, which make up the caskets as well as the vaults and liners required by most cemeteries to prevent ground collapse. Embalming fluid contains formaldehyde, a known carcinogen.

We hide all of that under a monoculture of a cemetery lawn, often laden with pesticides. Cremation, used for over 60 percent of all Oregon deaths in 2003, typically uses fossil fuels, and older crematoriums may release mercury from dental fillings.

You'll pay a pretty penny for all that: The average funeral costs about \$7,500 from start to finish, according to the Federated Funeral Directors of America.

Cynthia Beal, former Red Barn owner and 2002 Slug Queen, hopes that her local efforts to promote the natural burial movement will present an accessible alternative. Since she moved out of the natural food market, Beal has started the Natural Burial Company and begun publishing the online *Natural Funeral Monitor* and the web portal *FuneralResources.net*. Handmade funeral urns are currently on display at the downtown gallery, Opus Six, thanks to Beal's efforts to draw Pacific Northwest artists into the sector. A group that Beal initiated has met twice around natural burial.

Jewish, Muslim and Native-American cultures have long practiced natural burials; now, environmentalists are seeing it from a fresh perspective. For many, natural burial means a return to the earth at the end of life, or an interment that allows the body to decompose without degrading local resources. Others are drawn to the dual purpose that cemeteries can serve by conserving ecosystems while providing a burial site.

Some green cemeteries form partnerships with land trusts in which the burial costs provide a revenue stream, and a conservation easement protects the land from development. However, the Green Burial Council website warns that a conservation easement is the only way to ensure that a "green" cemetery will remain free of large monuments, embalming fluid and overly dense burials that will impact the local ecosystem.

And a natural burial carries a significantly

lower price tag than a conventional one. A biodegradable cardboard casket can run as low as \$20 whereas a conventional wooden or metal casket averages closer to \$2,000.

What does natural burial look like? According to Dan Stein, family mediator and a member of the local natural burial group, the practice covers a spectrum of possibilities. "It could involve bodies that are not embalmed and do not require liners," he said. "The other extreme is people that want to be buried in the woods somewhere in a shroud with no marker." Generally, natural burials include the use of local stones or the planting of a tree as monuments rather than the installation of elaborate headstones. Bodies are placed in biodegradable boxes or simply shrouded in fabric.

Natural burial is one of many sustainable practices in which the U.S. lags behind our European counterparts. The U.S. has only six "green" cemeteries while more than 200 have appeared in the U.K. in the last 15 years. However, some conventional cemeteries do allow for the practice. Locally, the Eugene Masonic Cemetery permits burials without a casket in a wooded setting. Sunset Hills Cemetery won't qualify as a natural burial site, as they require the use of a vault, but they avoid the use of chemicals to maintain their lawn and run their equipment on pure biodiesel.

The gap in the product line is where Beal sees a business opportunity. Wicker, sea grass and paper caskets are available in the U.K., yet few of those products are accessible here. Beal provides consulting and marketing services to Oregon companies in the burial sector. "I help people tailor an almost-natural product to meet the standards that are emerging," she said.

Beal worked with an Ashland casket maker to remove formaldehyde from his pine plywood and shift his marketing towards the growing interest in natural burial. But eventually, Beal plans to distribute goods herself, using what she calls a sustainable business platform. By 2007, she hopes to begin distributing the Ecopod, a casket made from recycled paper and currently only available in the U.K.

For now, Beal isn't sure exactly how to define her role in this movement, which she expects to take off as did the natural foods industry. But coming up on 50, she knows one thing about the sheer numbers and consciousness of her generation: "We're going to change things just by dying."

EW