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Natural burial advocate to speak in Bayside

Ryan Burns The Times-Standard
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Mark Harris has spent a lot of time researching funerals, and he believes that the way we bury our loved ones is about to undergo a major transformation.

"What's going to happen is green burials will change the funeral industry in our time," he said. "It's already happening."

Harris is a freelance journalist who lives in Bethlehem, Pa. His book, "Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial," takes a hard look at an issue most people tend to avoid -- death, or more specifically, what will happen to their bodies after death.

What he discovered in researching the funeral industry is that the way most Americans are buried -- pumped full of embalming fluid and encased in a bulletproof casket -- runs counter to the values of not just environmentalists, who decry the effects of toxic chemicals, cement and metal in the soil, but also those of everyday Americans.

Speaking with the Times-Standard from his Pennsylvania home, Harris said that an alternative approach has been rapidly gaining popularity.

"Green burial looks to return one's remains to the environment as simply and as naturally as possible," he said. "It acknowledges that the natural end of all life is decomposition and decay."

Titanium caskets, formaldehyde-based preservatives and cement tombs only delay the inevitable, he said, and a growing number of people are choosing much simpler

measures -- wrapping loved ones in shrouds or placing them in simple wooden coffins to be interred directly in the soil.

This will be the topic of conversation when Harris speaks at the annual meeting of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Humboldt later this month in Bayside.

Jan Rowen, president of the alliance, said that our county is the perfect place for a natural cemetery.

"We just need a piece of land," she said.

She and others in the community are looking for suitable local property and conferring with the Humboldt North Coast Land Trust in hopes of developing a natural cemetery in Humboldt County.

Contrary to popular belief, there are no federal laws requiring that a body be embalmed or placed in a casket. Laws regulating cemeteries vary from state to state and town to town, typically addressing issues such as distance from the public water supply, presence of paved access roads and the posting of bonds to ensure ongoing management of the grounds.

While working as an environmental columnist with the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, Harris visited the Ramsey Creek Preserve in Westminster, South Carolina, where Billy and Kimberly Campbell had established the country's first natural cemetery.

"I came away thinking that what the Campbells were doing had the potential to change burial practices in our time -- that the idea of a true dust-to-dust burial would speak to Americans, particularly the baby boomers," Harris said. "We're not a generation that has been afraid to think outside the box, and there's every reason to believe that we'll ... bring the same consciousness to end-of-life issues."

The number of natural cemeteries in the U.S. has grown to six, with as many as 200 more expected in the next year, Harris said.

Among other advantages, natural cemeteries serve as nature preserves. Often situated in woodland areas, the cemeteries can generate revenue to protect larger swaths of land surrounding the grounds.

"It has a vehicle to fund itself," Harris said.

Meanwhile, other earth-friendly alternatives have been gaining traction nationwide, including a renewed interest in burial at sea and a new technique called "eternal memorial reef balls" -- honeycombed domes containing the deceased's ashes that are dropped into artificial reef sites in the ocean where they serve as habitat for fish.

The "re-greening of the deathscape" is nothing short of a movement, said Harris, and the motivations for it are broad. Many people are drawn to the fact that their grandparents and great-grandparents were given green burials, even if that term didn't exist at the time. Others like that green burials cost thousands less than traditional methods. Still others take a spiritual outlook, seeking the practice as a true return to nature.



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"I think what's happening is Americans are realizing that green burial is not just about the environment," said Harris. "It speaks to old-fashioned American values like thrift, efficiency, love of family and respect for tradition."

Harris will speak at the Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Bayside on April 26 at 1 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more information on green burials, visit Harris' Web site, www.gravematters.us.

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