Sustainable Funeral Rites

How can funerals become more sustainable?

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Genesis 3:19, Bible

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People of faith, united in our diversity, caring for the sacred community of life
INTRODUCTION

When we look at tradition, the graves of most people were simple and Earth friendly.

People were typically buried within a day of their death, wrapped in a cloth shroud. Today, Muslim and Baha’i faith communities still bury their dead wrapped in cloth and the Jewish faith community use an unadorned wooden coffin. These simple burial wrappings acknowledge that in the eyes of God, we are all equal. Some faiths, including Hinduism and Buddhism, cremate their deceased and sprinkle the ashes on water—a lake, river or sea. By returning the mortal remains of loved ones in a simple way to the Earth, people were in tune with the natural cycles of life, death and renewal, which are part of God’s earthly creation.

As society has modernised and urbanised, many of the burial rituals that family members once undertook together at home, are now done by commercial family homes. We are caught between health laws, a shortage of burial sites and the commercialisation of funerals. The comforting rituals of family members preparing the deceased’s body together and of burying their loved one in a soft shroud or simple coffin have been replaced. We now let professionals preserve the bodies for us, using toxic preservation methods, including chemical embalming, and bury them in ornate and expensive caskets. These coffins are typically varnished, imported and lined with synthetic fabric and metal trimmings. They are often buried in graves with carved headstones and concrete borders, at a depth where decomposition is slow and the resulting nutrients are unavailable to plants.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO BE SUSTAINABLE?

In South Africa, with our rich heritage of faiths and cultures, we have a wide variety of burial rites including cremation. A full body burial in a cemetery is however still the preferred option of the major faith groups.

Sustainable burials

Cemeteries could be culturally significant spaces that also function as green lungs, especially in our cities. For cemeteries to function as valued community places, we need to return to a culture of natural burials, where our remains become part of Earth’s nutrient cycle in a way that does not pollute the soil and water.

There are also things we can do ourselves to contribute to a more sustainable burial:

Avoid chemical embalming

Avoid chemical embalming of the body. Embalming chemicals such as formaldehyde (formalin) kill soil bacteria and long exposure to embalming fluids puts morticians at risk of cancer.

Natural cloth shroud

Bury the deceased in a natural cloth shroud or wrapped in cloth made of natural fibres. Local options are available in South Africa.

Coffin Materials

Use a locally made wooden coffin or ‘wicker-type’ coffin without varnish, synthetic cloth linings or metal hinges and metal or plastic trim. Apart from being eco-friendly, unvarnished natural coffins provide the opportunity for the mourners to write blessing on the coffin. If desired, a cloth cover or pawl can be placed over the coffin and removed at burial. Local options for simple wooden coffins, wicker coffins and even sturdy cardboard coffins are available in South Africa.

Reuse a grave

Consider burial in a recycled grave i.e. a grave that is re-used in 10 to 20 years as is common practice in many European countries. This will require acceptance that the life force of the deceased no longer needs or inhabits the place where the body was buried. A small marker of natural local stone or wood or planting a tree would be an eco-friendly way of commemorating the memory of the departed rather than preserving an empty grave.

Eco-friendly grave markers

Use eco-friendly grave markers as described above to commemorate the memory of a loved one rather than a granite or marble headstone which was extracted from the Earth far away.

Real flowers

Use real, preferably locally grown indigenous flowers, herbs and plants rather than plastic ones which bleach in the sun and pollute the environment. Consider donating the price of the flowers to a local charity.

Green burial parks

Consider a green burial park such as Legacy Park on the outskirts of Cape Town. New green burial grounds are being developed country wide. In a green burial park either the body of a loved