

Case 8: Grave Decisions

Nearing the end of her life, Helly reflects on her final resting place. She wishes to be buried in her neighborhood's cemetery or cremated so that she can stay close to the rest of her family, but she finds herself deeply troubled with the negative impacts that traditional burials and cremations have on the environment. After looking into alternate methods of body disposal, she discovers green burials: a practice that seeks to minimize the environmental impact of a disposal. However, she lives in an urban area, and green burial locations are few and far between. The nearest site would be many hours away from the majority of her family and loved ones, who are encouraging her to stay closer to home.

Cemeteries have been increasingly criticized for their impracticality and inefficient land usage, despite being one of the most common forms of body disposal. While other public spaces like parks are used as gathering places for recreation, physical activity, and social connection, cemeteries are relatively low-traffic spaces, with limited use as a green space.^[1] Furthermore, the environmental harm of these burials is staggering. According to the Green Burial Council, Americans alone put 20 million feet of wood, 4.3 million gallons of toxic embalming fluids, 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete, 17,000 tons of copper and bronze, and 64,500 tons of steel in the ground each year through traditional burials.^[2]

Cremations are the most popular alternative to traditional burials and the most convenient, but they too have their disadvantages. A single cremation is estimated to produce 535 tons of carbon dioxide, as much as a 609-mile journey in an average-sized car.^[3] In total, cremations can emit as much as 360,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide annually, as well as sulfur dioxide, and other toxic chemicals into the atmosphere.^[4]

On the other hand, green burials serve to remedy the environmental issues of cremations and traditional burials. These burials often forgo caskets and use biodegradable materials instead. This allows for full decomposition, which returns nutrients to the ground faster to create rich soil for new life. However, green burials don't come without setbacks. There is an extremely limited number of green burial sites, and green burials use natural preservation techniques, which do not last as long as embalming. This often requires quick burial processes before the body decays. In addition, some cultures aren't compatible with green burials. Many religious processes include complicated procedures, with careful body preparation and lengthy wakes. Cremation is the most common form of burial in Hinduism, and some Christian denominations like Mormonism encourage embalming.

Proponents for cemeteries claim that they serve a unique role. A tangible representation of our respect for the dead, cemeteries are quiet and serene final resting places. Cemeteries are the hearts of their communities. They provide insight into the history and culture of a community

and preserve their legacy. Cemeteries not only highlight local history, but also honor those who have passed and their impact.

Helly's family believes that the best thing that she can do is stay close to home and join the legacy of her community. However, Helly remains torn between her obligation to her family and her duty to the environment.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we weigh the wishes of living people making plans for their own deaths against the potential needs of people of the future? What responsibilities, if any, do we hold to the environment even after our passing?
2. Is there anything wrong with inconveniencing family members when making plans for after your passing? How, if at all, do postmortem plans differ from other plans?
3. To what extent should we take into account cultural traditions and practices when weighing body disposition methods?

References

- [1] <https://ggwash.org/view/82955/cemeteries-use-a-lot-of-space-and-are-terrible-for-the-environment-maybe-theres-a-better-way>
- [2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/smarter-living/green-funeral-burial-environment.html>
- [3] <https://earthfuneral.com/resources/is-cremation-bad-for-environment/>
- [4] <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/cemeteries-burials-american-landscape>