

The Standing of “Green” in Funeral Service

Consumers remain confused as to what truly qualifies as a green alternative, and one funeral director wonders if there’s really any financial benefit to offering “green” services.

Dear Dan,

I have attended many conventions and meetings over the past several years and have heard the phrase “environmentally friendly” more and more. I hear about environmentally friendly cemeteries and, of course, funeral homes promoting themselves as providing green funerals for those families that are interested. My question is this: Is there any green (money) in green funerals or interments?

Signed, Prius Hearse Driver

Dear Prius,

I, too, have heard the phrase “green funeral,” have been on site at several green cemetery areas, learned about green body preparation and have viewed environmentally friendly caskets and urns. In fact, while the world currently uses the term “green” to describe these practices, natural burial concepts have been used for thousands of years.

So why the hubbub over the past few years? Today, we have cars that run on electrical power, homes that capture the

light of the sun for their power supply and hot water, and we are all aware of the phrase “carbon footprint.” Yet in the world of funeral service, we see very little change in the 21st century compared to what was used in the 20th when it comes to that “carbon footprint.” Yes, we have formaldehyde-free embalming fluids, but that movement was more OSHA driven than green driven, as formaldehyde is now categorized as a known carcinogen. An alternative chemical was necessary.

The New York Times and other print media sources, television and bloggers are all writing about the new age of funeral service. However, as much as the media are trying to fire up a subject, it is not igniting. Cremation is being considered “new” and innovative; ironically, it only took 139 years after being demonstrated at the 1876 World’s Fair to become a hot subject (pun intended).

In focus groups conducted with consumers, I ask questions about modern-day funeral service applications and how much people would be willing to pay for them. One such tangent deals with environmental issues. We show pictures of a casket made from reeds or some other plant-based product and ask families for their thoughts. Usually, the 65-year-old wearing Birkenstocks will be in favor of it, while others in more traditional footwear will not. I get nearly universal positive agreement when I ask people if they think cremation promotes environmentally responsible behavior. In reality, the carbon footprint of cremation does not really fit the definition of “green.” That usually doesn’t matter, however – if consumers think it’s green, then it will be compared as a green alternative.

Alkaline hydrolysis (AH) is often com-

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pared to cremation. But to be defined as cremation, it means that fire is used to break down the human body. Those marketing AH often promote its softer effect on the environment. However, AH uses about the same amount of fuel as a retort and a machine that costs up to 500 percent the cost of a retort.

“Green cemeteries” or cemeteries with “green” areas are still scarce and not a top consumer choice. In a metropolitan area such as Atlanta, for example, there are about 5.5 million residents and thus about 40,000 deaths per year. When given the choice for green earth burial, consumers choose this option less than 25 times a year!

As we study why consumers choose a funeral home, I have not yet seen a discernible percentage that says they chose a funeral home because of its marketing to the environmentally conscious community.

Several years ago, there was a well-funded company that planned to build a pyramid more than 700 feet high to house hu-

man remains. Part of the business plan was to have a solar crematory. The architect explained that the peak of the pyramid would have a glass top that would reflect the sun to a point below and create the high heat needed to cremate a body. I was suddenly thrown back to being a seventh-grader during a Philadelphia summer, armed with a magnifying glass, cremating ants on the sidewalk.

Green is not always about cost savings either. Burial at sea can cost twice what placing a body into a crypt can cost, and while scattering cremated remains at sea is less expensive, there remains the carbon footprint of the cremation and the boat ride.

Green is not always about cost savings either. A Prius costs more than a gasoline engine Toyota. A Tesla costs almost four times the price of an average Ford. Solar panels have a five- to seven-year payout. Organic foods are double the cost. Yet we think “green” consumers are making de-

isions, at least partly, based on saving money. They are not. They are committed to a higher ideal – saving the planet. When choosing a natural burial, for instance, they are not thinking they’ll be spending less since they’re saving the fee of embalming.

Another example is burial at sea, which can cost twice what placing a body into a crypt can cost. Green consumers see this as a natural cycle. Scattering cremated remains at sea is less expensive, but there remains the carbon footprint of the cremation and the boat ride. Ironically, Jessica Mitford, whose *The American Way of Death* began this whole anti-funeral director rant, chose to be cremated and buried at sea.

In some cases, we are combining cremated remains with soil and growing plants. This, too, is not so new. Cemeteries in England often resemble huge gardens, as each plant’s roots are the final resting place for an urn. The real point is that we are coming up with creative means to honor the dead.

Prius, you wanted to know if there is any “green” in green funerals. As you can see, there is much to talk about when it comes to green funerals, environmentally friendly burials and carbon footprints. My suspicion is that at present, all that’s happening is that people are talking about it, but no one is doing much with it.

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