

Earth Burial ***A Tradition in Simplicity***

What is a Traditional Funeral?

In early America, home funerals were the practice everywhere, and each community had a group of women who came in to help with the “laying out of the dead.” Visitation was held in the front parlor followed by a procession to the church and cemetery.

At the time of the Civil War, embalming came into practice for shipping bodies over a long distance. By the turn of the century, the newly formed National Funeral Directors Association was pressing its members to consider themselves “professionals,” not tradesmen as the earlier coffin-makers had been. Regular use of embalming was encouraged, and the new “professionals” used it to suggest they were keepers of the public health.

However, according to a recent opinion from the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, GA, there is no public health purpose served by embalming. It is not required by law except in unusual circumstances by a very few states. Refrigeration is the usual alternative to embalming when the body must be preserved for later disposition. In other countries embalming is rarely used.

In some parts of North America, religious and ethnic groups have maintained the practice of caring for their own dead. With the spread of the Hospice movement, families are assuming more responsibility at the time of death, and home or church funerals are again returning. Those who have been involved with such funerals

have found them therapeutic and meaningful, with costs being minimal.

When the term “traditional” is used it generally means:

- A time of visitation with the family, during which the casket may be present (“viewing” is most often done by the immediate family and friends during private time),
- A religious service in a church,
- And/or a graveside ceremony for earth burial of the body or cremated remains.

The cost of funerals in recent years has risen to an average of \$6,500 or more, not including cemetery and monument expense. Ask the funeral home, if you use one, whether “professional services” are billed at a fixed fee, or by the hour. The more responsibility a family assumes, the more affordable a funeral can be. Schedule visitation and services at the home or church, without the use of mortuary staff, to limit costs.

In most states, including Washington, family members can file the death certificate and permits, allowing the family or a church group to handle all death arrangements without the use of a mortician.

The caskets sold by most funeral homes are usually marked up significantly above wholesale costs. Price lists compiled by the Interfaith Funeral Information Committee, in Phoenix, AZ, indicate the average retail cost of a casket is 2.5 to 5 times the wholesale cost. Check the web site www.funerals-ripoffs.org to see a list of wholesale casket prices.

Lighting and arrangement are used to influence extravagant spending, with low-cost containers often kept in the basement or garage, if stocked at all. No casket, airtight or sealed, renders any additional preservation.

The “minimum container” often used for cremation, is equally appropriate for earth burial. It is usually a simple wood— or cardboard and wood—box that should cost less than \$100. If the casket is to be present during visitation or the funeral, it can be draped with cloth of the family’s choosing.

Mortuaries which serve memorial societies, such as People’s Memorial Association usually use an attractive cloth-covered particle-board casket, the cost of which is included in the special modest price the society has arranged for members who choose burial.

Many families have found personal satisfaction in building and decorating a casket together. Ernest Morgan’s book contains instructions for making a plywood coffin. If you have built a casket, or purchased one elsewhere, a funeral home may try to charge a handling fee. While restaurants may charge a corkage fee for bringing your own bottle of wine, the Federal Trade Commission has made it illegal for funeral homes charge such fees if you should bring your own casket.

Other families may choose to dig the grave themselves. This is what our great-grandparents did years ago, so this is not a new idea. In Washington state, you cannot bury a body on private property unless the plot is registered as a cemetery with the state. You can plan a traditional church or home service, or a graveside one. All local

permits must be in order first.

Typically, a plot in a church cemetery or a community owned graveyard is far more economical than one owned by a funeral home. A lot in a national cemetery is free of charge to veterans and immediate family, but there may not be one nearby with space.

When buying a lot in a commercial cemetery, care should be taken to examine the contract. You may be purchasing only the right to be buried in that cemetery, not necessarily in the lot shown to you. In a few instances, unscrupulous salespersons have sold more "lots" than land available.

Many cemetery personnel will go out of their way to help family members make their own arrangements. However, you should expect a charge of \$500-\$1,000 to open and close the gravesite, especially on weekends or holidays.

Many cemeteries require a grave liner to keep the earth from settling after burial. A one-piece "coffin vault" serves the same purpose but costs about twice as much. Unfortunately, some establishments do not mention the cheaper "liner" or stock it.

A permanent marker can be very expensive or not at all costly, depending on your preference and the limitations of the cemetery. Planting flowers, a bush, or a tree are long-lasting but low-cost memorials, when permitted.

Some cemeteries require monuments to be purchased only through them, or charge an excessive handling fee if purchased elsewhere. You should expect a charge of several hundred dollars for "setting" even a modest marker.

Some cemeteries bill a family annually for upkeep of a grave site, but it is now more common for cemeteries to charge an initial fee for "perpetual care." These funds should be placed in trust and not absorbed into the cemetery's general operating fund. When you are dealing with a for-profit cemetery, be sure to ask for an accounting.

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Additional Resources

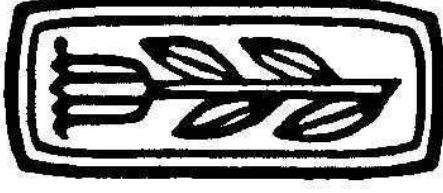
Dealing Creatively With Death: A Manual of Death Education and Burial by Ernest Morgan. Upper Access, 160 pp. \$14.95

Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love by Lisa Carlson. Upper Access, 640 pp. \$29.95

You may order these books from the Funeral Consumer's Alliance at www.funerals.org or by calling 1-800-765-0107

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