Cadaver Chatter:

Reactions to Burial Versus Cremation

One of the most basic decisions confronting a funerary pre-planner is the matter of bodily disposition. Just what do you want done with your defunct body once it becomes useless? You will need to weigh the pros and the cons of each method of dissolution.

Before making any big decisions, always take heed of this guiding directive: Tap resources. Gather input. Become informed. To aid in accomplishing this, seek the experience of others.

You need not do this by yourself. A whole heavenly host of veteran decedents have made these decisions in the past, or at least their families made the decisions for them. So get in touch with them! Solicit their feedback.

First, determine what information you hope to glean from these spirits. You'll want to ask relevant questions that will help you decide between burial, entombment, or cremation. Then recall circumstances following the deaths of individuals recently deceased, and choose two to interview… one whose body was cremated, and one whose bodily remains were buried under ground. Take time now to find a spiritualist and make arrangements for a séance. Record the comments and then bring them back so that we can develop a discussion around them.

Welcome back! Apparently, based on your volume of notes, the interviews were conducted successfully. What's that you're saying? You had such productive conversations with the first two that you called forth a few others, too? Swell! Let's find out what they had to say.

Pebbles Grayner: "Why did I choose cremation? I'll be darned if I was going to pay an outlandish price to be down under and walked all over, just like I was while alive!"

The cost factor is a significant variable. Generally, cremation is less expensive, but with all of the options available these days, you could possibly get "carried away" and overspend. Since there are also costly options for whole body interment, though, that could happen in either case. Obviously, size tends to determine costs, so a substantive casket will undoubtedly cost more than a small urn. Also, the processes and services associated with burials generally are more expensive. One example would be the fee for maintenance and perpetual care of a gravesite. Theoretically, it is possible to save thousands of dollars by choosing direct cremation as soon as possible after death without embalming, or without funeral home expenses like visitation or the cost of a casket, especially if remains are scattered or kept at home rather than buried in a cemetery.

Hardasa Rockon: I was cremated because I just wanted to get in and out as fast as I could. Anyway, I never liked lying in one place for too long. Quickies were always best for me!"

Some people reject burial based on their opinion that it is more important to focus on memories than on an inert body. They may feel that the continued presence of a lifeless body is pointless. A body that is cremated oxidizes, or decomposes, more rapidly than one that is buried. Symbolically, it represents a swift return to the elements, as in the notion of becoming "one with nature."

Daisy Pushupinger: "Always a naturalist, I figured I had it in me to do some good if I was buried. Why let fertilizer go to waste?"

Some abhor the idea of burning bodies, particularly those who have been scarred by horrible visions of Jewish ancestors who were incinerated during the Holocaust. Many people simply are more comfortable with a more gradual return to the earthy elements. Some favor a pastoral image of a body lying in fertile soil from which springs new life. For instance, within a cardboard box not far under the ground surface and without manufactured paraphernalia, an unembalmed body cultivates the natural cycle of life.

Sandy Little: Gosh, for me, cremation was the only way to go. (HaHa). Seriously, I wasn't going to have anymore of that lookin' for land hassle. Nah, I had enough of that when I was alive, tryin' to find enough space for my goats."

Real estate concerns warrant consideration. Land costs, especially in urban areas, are getting to be more prohibitive, and cemeteries in some regions are filling up fast.

Nowadays, “double-deckers” don’t just refer to buses and trains! Underground traffic jams could become almost as troublesome as the ones on the freeways! And before long, people may need to rely on “well grounded” realtor rooters to “cover (or uncover) the field” and “sniff out” cemetery options (what an offbeat job description!). However, some folks believe that use of prime ground territory for this purpose is an improvident commitment of space. They prefer that land be reserved for the living. Meanwhile, the development and expansion of above-ground mausoleum structures at many cemeteries has helped to alleviate the housing crunch. Air space rather than earth space appeals to people who shun the notion of spending eternity in “de’ cold, cold ground.”

Cherry Woodin: “It’s not sickening down here, but it’s almost as polluted as the city where I lived. Good grief! There’s stuff everywhere! I’m just glad I don’t have to inhale any of it!”

In recent years, more attention has been directed toward land preservation and environmental concerns. Some say cremated remains cannot replenish the earth with enriched soil and rejuvenated growth the way a buried body can. Typically, though, a body is buried with excess baggage. Many people are averse to clogging the subterranean domain with unnatural materials. They allude to man-made products like metal coffins with their nuts, bolts, and fixings, along with bodily metals, plastic handles, nameplates, and other accessories, in addition to concrete liners and vaults that won’t erode. Casket manufacturers are considered hazardous waste generators, with the citing of chemicals such as methyl

and xylene in protective finishes. Toxic elements like these as well as chemicals such as formaldehyde (a confirmed carcinogen) in addition to other preservatives and adhesives leach into the soil and threaten water sources. In fact, environmentalists contend that formaldehyde purportedly produces gases that contribute to the formation of ground level ozone; theoretically, large quantities could contribute to respiratory problems, acid rain, global warming, and particulate air pollution. For many conservationists, even the destruction of trees for the manufacture of caskets is another regrettable aspect of this type of burial.

Smokey Stackaton: "Can you believe it? I spent my entire life advocating for clean air. I even stopped smoking. Then suddenly, there I was, spewing forth more carbon than I ever did in all my days of ciggy piggin' tobacco."

Some cremation opponents cite environmental pollution emanating from crematories. Gas is consumed for the process of cremation, thereby tapping into natural resources. Carbon dioxide is produced, contributing to the global warming plight. Other known pollutants like nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide, and hydrogen chloride are released into the atmosphere during the burning process. Mercury, a heavy metal that is toxic to plants and animals, is introduced into the air as vapor, due to the combustion of tooth fillings. Testing by regulatory agencies for emission levels of particulate matter and noxious gases has become standard protocol. So cremation imposes a potential for adverse environmental sequelae.

Blaze Infernoden: "Nah, it didn't bother me, goin' up in smoke. I was used to it, cause that's what happened to all of my plans when I 'got burned' by poor business decisions during my life. But, hell, for a while there it got so hot in that chamber, I was afraid somebody had pushed the wrong button and I had ended up where I didn't want to be!"

At some point, environmentalists who are cremation enthusiasts (or shall we say advocates?) may be able to retort (ahem) by citing another benefit to "add fuel to their fire." Perhaps a newfound conservation approach in the Swedish town of Halmstad may spread to other parts of the world. There, they hope to capture a new form of "biofuel" by using heat generated by their crematorium rather than allowing it to be wastefully dispersed in the air. The intention is to use it for heating their own premises first, and eventually route it via a network to other local buildings, including homes. Maybe the process will become a "heat wave" of the future!

Peace Lulling: "I really have nothing to say. Change the channel, please."

Hmm. Let's regroup. Regardless of positive or negative features, it's apparent that a clear-cut, black-and-white comparison of the primary dispositional modalities is untenable. Neither option necessarily stands out as purely suitable for anyone or anything. Many folks may consider this

a gnarly conundrum. Perhaps your next step in evaluating these options might be to focus on your family. How might a particular course of action affect them? We'll reconnoiter and continue to pore over the invoked words of our ghostly experts.

...Iris Crypton: "Lord, have mercy! My dear old harried Harry was running around 'like a chicken with its head cut off' (better scratch that from the record in case it's too graphically foul), trying to get everything in order before the funeral. I was afraid he'd be next up on the list of folks to join me. I didn't want to see him here... at least not just yet... because after seven years of wedded bliss, I was itching to get away from him for a while. I needed a breather from his constant fawning over me. Since Harry always said I was the prettiest flower in the bunch, he had someone paint blossoms on my casket, kind of at the last minute before I had to be whisked away to the mausoleum for the entombment ceremony in the chapel."

Timing could be a determinant. With burials, there are time constraints relative to disposition. Preparations for interment and for services must be completed within a limited period at a time when emotions are unduly taxed. If an unembalmed body is to be buried or entombed, usually it is done within twenty-four to forty-eight hours or a little longer, depending upon state mandates.

…**Raina Joyner:** "I'd be the first to tell you that I never did anything incredibly exceptional. But, oh, what an amazing life celebration my people had for me! My bodily remains stayed in a vase on a shelf in our kitchen for a couple of months while the plans were being arranged. It was a good place to be, except that Chip Potter knocked it over with his elbow and the container broke into smithereens. Even though my folks thought this was an earth-shattering mishap, it was okay because my residuals were in a plastic bag; only a few pieces escaped through a small tear in it. They lovingly picked me up and put me back together again… well, as much as possible. On the day of the memorial service and scattering, it showered. But that didn't matter. Those raindrops were just my tears of joy coming from heaven."

If a body has been cremated, there is virtually unlimited time for preparing services and memorials. Sometimes funeral homes and crematories provide temporary storage for cremated remains, but state directives are apt to limit the time they are obliged to hold them, allowing for scattering if they are not claimed in a timely manner. More likely, relatives would house them until a disposition decision was made. This could present a distinct advantage for family members. Memorial activities can be addressed beyond the stage of initial bereavement, thereby facilitating a more thoughtful and possibly a more rewarding and enduring experience. Sometimes, too, remains remain in a "holding pattern" within a residence while awaiting the death of a spouse, before being reunited inside a casket, burial plot, or other dispositional milieu.

…**Lonelee Abandonaldra:** "My casket was buried in a lovely memorial park with lush lawns and all kinds of beautiful features fit for a queen. At the time, everyone thought they'd come regularly to visit because it would be like taking a walk in a park. But that didn't happen. The only parking they did was in their own driveways! So I guess you might say that I belong to a new family of Castaways!"

Perhaps in today's mobile society, flexibility is a factor worth contemplating. Chances are, if a whole body is buried somewhere, then that really is the *final* resting place (unless disinterment becomes necessary due to flooding, a proposed housing development, or a new highway!). Family members are more apt to live far away, causing them to be unable to visit the gravesite. This may or may not bother them. In actuality, most people in the midst of frenetic lifestyles don't necessarily frequent gravesites anyway. They may espouse an attitude like that of a woman who when asked why she never visited her father's grave replied that it was because he wasn't there… he was in her heart.

…**Chuckles Overmilesintin:** "Up here, you can't beat the view of what's going on down there! One day my family members were packing for a vacation trip when Tucker beckoned to Carrie, 'Would you grab my sunglasses and that gym bag? And be sure you also remember to bring the can of Grandpa!' Oh, how I guffawed! I would have 'split my gut' had I not already been reduced to pieces!"

Actually, this is not as outlandish as it may seem. A poignant symbolic gesture led one widow to carry her husband's cremated remains to a place he had yearned to visit. As an ardent admirer of the Pittsburgh Steelers, much of his wardrobe bore their logo and he had named his dog "Steeler." Since his zeal had never been consummated by attending one of their football games, his wife honored his dying request. After donning a team hat and painting her face with the team colors, she and her son fulfilled his wishes and carried his urn into the stadium so that he could finally "be there" for a game. Obviously, cremated remains are more portable, at least for folks who aren't governed by religious mandates such as the Roman Catholic requisite for their burial or entombment. So there can be advantages of versatility and practicality.

…**Parker Voyeurilust:** "Well, I declare! Who would ever have thought I'd end up on a dresser in my wife's bedroom that she shares with her new husband! That man must realize by now that he hooked up with someone who has problematic separation anxiety. But let me tell you, he is somethin' else! I never even knew there could be that many gymnastic configurations for romping in the bedroom! I sure hope they keep me right where I am because I wouldn't want to miss anything. You're never too far gone to learn something new!"

With cremation, family members can decide how long they want to keep the remains in their own possession. For some, this is comforting, as it affords them an extended opportunity

for their acclimation to the reality of the death. Even if there is intent for eventual disposition of some sort, this allows a measure of control in that folks can take whatever time is necessary for them to feel emotionally ready for physical separation. Until then, they have tangible evidence of a loved one's presence. And there's always the option of retaining remains more permanently. Besides traveling "together," they could even keep "you" on display!

…**Trapper Separado:** "I'm kind of sorry that I'm down here missing out on all of the social activities up there. They put me in a section of the cemetery where I don't know a soul! At least, I wish my new neighborhood could have been near my son's house on the sunny west coast. But I can't exactly 'pack up and go' now because I'm so under the weather and already gone. Maybe I should have 'gone to pot' instead."

Cremated remains are easily transportable if the family should happen to move, not only if "you" are "living" with them, but also if your remains are at a more traditional site. They can be shipped easily and inexpensively. In the case of residential relocation, certainly it is more conceivable to transfer an urn as opposed to a casket from one cemetery or memorial park to another, considering the expense and labor the larger "undertaking" would entail. However, if a need for exhumation and re-examination of a body arose at some point in the future, obviously, it would be impossible if cremation had been effected.

…**Ashley Totamundo:** "Here, there, and everywhere! That's where I ended up. Parts of me are hanging around necks in pendants… and in birdhouses… and in ceramic figurines… and in pockets of exploring adventurers. I'm everybody's good luck charm. I only wish I had been so popular when I was taking my own journeys!"

In a spirit of novelty, some folks like to fathom unique destinations for cremated remains. If an exceptionally special place appeals to you, there's greater likelihood that cremated rather than full body remains could be deposited there. Feasible locations, as well as multi-dimensional receptacles, are varied and allow for considerable flexibility. People may appreciate the opportunity to divvy up the remains, either to distribute them among family members, perhaps as permanent keepsakes, or for dispersal in a variety of settings. Some have arranged for small portions to be given to all guests at a commemorative service, with instructions for people to deposit them in a place of their own choosing that they would deem to be of significance in relation to the decedent.

…**Evoca Sorcerofem**: "Reposing here is about as exciting as watching grass grow. Actually, that's about all you can do down here from this underground vantage point. But since my friends believe that I'll be back to haunt them, I'm happy to be lurking in the good earth upon which they stand. This way, I can keep track of my former companions and let them know I'm still around. I wouldn't want to disappoint them, so the next time they're dead to the world, I won't be! I'll do my apparition act and invoke some mystical mayhem."

Some mourners object to the notion of saying good-bye to an individual represented by a container of fragments. For them, it may be difficult to grasp memories of the person in that context. Burial might be a better option if that's the case, or if your people believe that one's soul hovers over one's body after death.

…**Digby Fielding:** "Land sakes alive! (as my grandmother used to say)… It would have been most inhospitable of me, had I not been buried. My buddy, the superintendent of cemetery operations in our diocese, makes regular visits for quality assurance (while having 'chats' with former parishioners). Besides disappointing him, it would have devastated my folks. Needing to make sure I'm no longer a lost soul, they come to the grave each year on my birthday to pray for reassurance that I've finally found the sense of direction I couldn't find on earth."

There are those for whom vigils at burial sites become a habitual part of their routines. Or, at the least, a visit on a holiday becomes a tradition to answer certain psychological needs (note the traffic advisories at large cemeteries on Mother's Day!). For some, it is a means of connecting with their loved one, to feel "with" the essence of the departed person. It may be a place where they actually talk to the deceased. That "resting place" for perceived images of a body's remains is a destination where they feel that they can commune with one's spirit, perhaps even addressing unsettled conflicts in an effort to secure solace. A grave site with an image of bodily presence may be important to certain folks.

Now that you've conjured up some feedback, what is your gut feeling? That is, besides the one that's tempting you to abandon this matter and take a nap – though, hopefully, NOT a "dirt nap"!

Will your choice be based on convictions or a philosophical stance that relates to religion, culture, or the environment? Will it align with tradition? Will it reflect a desire for simplicity, convenience, or frugality? Will you respond to the perceived needs of your family members?

Having surveyed the primary methods of disposition, you may be feeling flummoxed and in a state of disconcerted conflict. Possibly, burial doesn't "set well" with you. Or maybe the immediate finality of direct cremation, or even delayed incendiary action, doesn't exactly light your fire, causing you to feel hot and bothered even by the prospect of it. Perhaps the prospect of alkaline hydrolysis or other less conventional approaches to disposition would help lower your heat of resistance.

Rather than jumping to a conclusion, maybe you'll want to explore alternatives options available or unconventional, divergent scenarios if you pine for an afterlife adventure.

But whichever means of disposition you choose, the decision will provide you with the foundation for the remainder of your funerary choices.

Excerpt from the recreational pre-planning book,
Pondering Leaves: Composing and Conveying
Your Life Story's Epilogue
(no longer available)

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Mary Ellen Markant

Signature Sunsets

ponderingleaves@gmail.com