A Shortcut for Decomposing Human Bodies: Settling In Among the Wood Chips

Have you ever dreamed of sleeping on a bed of hay? Although most likely an unrealistic aspiration during life, death may present a comparable opportunity. Composting is no longer confined to food scraps and yard debris. Human beings can choose to include their bodies among the array of organic resources transformable into material available to support vegetative growth.

As an alternative to the cellular breakdown that occurs by means of a green burial, now there is a way to activate this earthy process above ground and under controlled conditions. Dubbed “Natural Organic Reduction” (NOR), the method mimics the familiar manner of agricultural and domestic composting as well as the decay that occurs in a naturally oxygenated and biologically endowed underground natural burial environment.

Legislative approval will undoubtedly spark establishment of new business operations providing the service. Each of the pioneer ventures has its own policies, practices, type of equipment, and terminology. But the underlying procedural approach is congruent, in accordance with certain basic principles.

An unembalmed body is laid in a wooden or steel container, dubbed by some as a “cradle,” and is tucked within a mixture of vegetative additives, typically, straw, alfalfa, and wood chips. Flowers or other biodegradable items may sometimes be deposited on top of it as part of ceremonial observances.

In the presence of appropriate amounts of carbon and nitrogen, naturally occurring microbes, namely, bacteria, protozoa, and fungi, go to work while proliferating throughout their purposeful mission. Fueled by invigorating oxygen and with the help of periodic rotations for aeration, the microbes decompose the body, reducing it to molecular elements within a period of thirty days. This breaking-down activity in an enclosed chamber generates a high temperature,

thereby destroying pathogens. The result is a metamorphosis of bodily substance into an impressive amount of fertile soil. Following this transformation, any remaining bone fragments are pulverized, as are teeth if not removed. Inorganic matter such as metal pieces or medical devices are extracted. The soil is then transferred to a bin for curing over a period of a few weeks or months.

After that, this beneficial compost amounting to one cubic yard that can fill the bed of a medium-sized pickup truck is ready for delivery, either to family members or to a chosen site. Certain NOR enterprises have options for disposition on affiliated conservation land or forest acreage. Families may choose to take portions and donate the rest for restoration of land at such sites. A scope of options for keeping, sharing, or ecological gifting in variable quantities presents decision-making opportunities. The nutritive soil can be utilized in fields (with a probable restriction against enriching crops that are edible by humans), gardens, indoor plants, etc. or in conjunction with memorial tree- or shrub-planting ceremonies.

Jenifer Bliss, the wife of an organic farmer and composting expert, scattered some of his reconstituted remains in a field where she would cultivate herbs and flowers. Also, a small amount was used as compost for a cherry tree she planted on the farm. The remaining material is in a pile next to their home, available to spread over crops and also for distribution to friends and fellow farmers.

She noted, "This is the cycle of life. We start from two cells coming together and boom, we're this miracle creation. And when our spirit separates from our bodies, nature's set up to disintegrate us into micro-particles that will nourish life anew.”

Laying-in ceremonies, either in person or online, are offered by certain companies. Commemorative moments experienced at the time when the body is introduced into the chamber may include a speaker or faith leader, music, and ceremonial elements, including rituals that employ candlelight or guided breathing.

As of 2021, the process has been legalized in Washington, Colorado and Oregon. Bills under consideration in California, Maine, and New York did not pass, but will be reintroduced next year. Other states with proposals include Massachusetts, Vermont, and Delaware.

It's new. It's efficient. And it's productive. Will it become a trendy way to go? Time will tell. For now, if you like the idea, instead of utilizing your entire body in this manner, you can lend a hand by letting legislators know that you think NOR warrants serious consideration for state approval. Maybe by the time you need it, the option will be at your fingertips.

*Jenifer Bliss reference
https://people.com/human-interest/human-composting-a-new-end-of-life-choice-turns-bodies-into-soil/

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