



Presentation on Natural Burials

On November 14, 2017, Care for Our Common Home Ministry at St John Neumann in Reston, VA invited two speakers to educate us on the topic of Natural Burials. Vern Conaway is the volunteer contact for Cool Spring Natural Cemetery, located on the grounds of Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, VA. Jordan Wince is a funeral director at Adams-Green Funeral Home in Herndon. They addressed the following questions:

How does a natural burial differ from a traditional burial?

Natural burials use no toxic embalming chemicals (such as formaldehyde), concrete vaults, or metal caskets. The intent is to allow the body to decompose naturally and return to the earth, “dust to dust.”

Is a funeral home needed for a natural burial?

Most definitely yes. The cemetery receives the body but does not hold or transport the body. The funeral home would do that. When the family lets the funeral home know their wishes for a natural burial, the options for metal caskets, vaults, headstones, etc. are not focused on.

What alternatives are there to traditional embalming?

Natural embalming fluids may be used, e.g., Enigma products from The Champion Company, which biodegrade in seven days. These chemicals are a safe, effective, non-toxic, non-hazardous alternative to traditional toxic/formaldehyde embalming chemicals.

Is an open casket viewing still an option?

Yes, family only viewing is offered when no embalming is done, or publicly within 7 days if natural embalming fluids are used.

How soon must the burial occur after death?

There is no set limit. The body is kept in refrigeration until the burial takes place. A normal time is a few days up to a week, but the body can be kept refrigerated longer if necessary (e.g., for relatives to arrive from out of town).

What casket materials are available?

There are many biodegradable options, including an unfinished pine coffin constructed without nails or glue, a wicker basket coffin, or a paper mache coffin. The body is respectfully covered with only biodegradable materials. No metal zippers or belts or clothes with non-natural materials are used. The simplest burial option is a shroud, with no casket. A metal casket can be rented for the viewing and funeral; the body would then be transferred to a biodegradable casket or shroud for burial.

Is a burial vault required?

A vault is never used in a natural burial. Part of the cost of the burial includes upkeep of the cemetery. Sunken areas will be leveled out.

Does the cemetery accept cremains (the remains from cremation)?

Yes, a single burial plot can hold up to two sets of cremains. The container holding the cremains must be biodegradable.

What types of markers are used?

A simple river stone with the person's name and dates of birth and death is placed at the burial site. Cool Spring has an engraver who can do this, or the family can arrange for another engraver.

Do all cemeteries offer this, or only a limited few?

There are only a few natural cemeteries in Virginia. Duck Run Natural Cemetery in Harrisonburg is the only one that is "certified green" and meets the specific requirements of the Green Burial Council (see link below).

What does a Natural cemetery look like?

The first thing you will notice is that it does not look like a cemetery. The grounds are natural forest and meadow. There are no headstones or decorations. A small backhoe is used to dig the grave for a body; grave sites for cremains are hand dug by the monks. The grounds at Cool Spring Cemetery are consecrated ground, and the monks pray daily for all the souls buried there. At Cool Spring the entire cemetery is covered by a conservation easement.

Care for our Common Home summarized some environmental factors to consider:

Traditional Burial:

Uses land as well as energy, water, and chemicals to maintain the cemetery. Many resources are used and buried including toxic embalming fluid, hardwoods, copper, bronze, steel, and concrete.

Cremation:

Uses energy and releases CO₂ (equal to a 500-mile car ride) and mercury to atmosphere. Nutrients from body are not returned to the earth.

Funerals in general:

The carbon footprint from out-of-town travel is significant. Flowers are often flown in as well. Consider live streaming the ceremony for out of towners. Consider purchasing carbon offsets to mitigate the emissions impact of air travel.

Resources:

Cool Spring Natural Cemetery at Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, VA,
www.virginiatrappists.org/cemetery/

Green Burial Council, <https://greenburialcouncil.org/>

We believe burial is “green” only when it furthers legitimate environmental and societal aims such as protecting worker health, reducing carbon emissions, conserving natural resources, and preserving habitat.

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

“Bereavement and Funerals,” www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/bereavement-and-funerals/index.cfm

“Cremation and the Order of Christian Funerals,” www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/bereavement-and-funerals/cremation-and-funerals.cfm