

Shelton-Mason County Journal - Dedicated to the citizens of Mason County, Washington since 1886

Dust thou art

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: “Disputacione Betwyx the Body and the Wormes,” a 15th-century Carthusian debate poem in which a woman’s remains debate the worms returning her to the earth. (Public domain courtesy photo)

The Bible’s Genesis 3:19 tells us that we shall revert to the substance out of which we are made: “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

Last week, the air pollution control agency in Los Angeles County issued an emergency order temporarily suspending permit conditions for cremating human remains. The limit is meant to protect air quality, but the “backlog” of COVID-19 mortalities is more pressing.

I have seen the 60% of water constituting my loved ones vanish from a furnace flue. It looks like heat waves rippling off desert asphalt.

In this ongoing precarity of existence we might well ask what to do with ourselves when there is nothing left to do. Though traditional, burial is a toxic and expensive process with a lasting legacy.

Cremation, like burning slash, is another wasteful and archaic option. Yet the National Funeral Directors of America estimates that 80% of those dying in the United States will be cremated by 2040.

The energy required to reduce a human body to 3 to 9 pounds of ash is equivalent to one person’s monthly consumption. And there are other factors: In the United Kingdom, it’s estimated that 16% of mercury pollution comes down to incinerated dental fillings.

I was discussing after-life options with an older friend, and she thought burial was the worst possible route, so she’d chosen cremation. She was right by half, and we explored the alternatives that abound in a world more aware of death and its burdens.

You might know that Seattle is the home of the nation’s first human body composting facility via a process called NOR (natural organic reduction). This process was approved by the Washington legislature with the passage of ESB 5001. Recompose, which operates out of an industrial park in Kent, can compost one’s remains in 30 days. They claim this process, versus cremation, saves 1 metric ton of carbon dioxide per person.

The resulting compost is then screened for nonorganic materials (pacemakers, implants) and, as with conventional compost, cured awhile. Once safe for application, family members may choose to donate

or pick up the compost. If donated, it is applied to an ecological restoration project at Bells Mountain in Vancouver, Washington.

Research shows that hot composting (higher than 131 deg. F) kills COVID-19 in short order, although the time involved in cold composting is more than enough to clear virus. Any danger exists in infected remains, not finished compost.

Since Recompose's 131-degree temperature over 72 hours is enough to kill salmonella and fecal coliform (per state regulations), it works for COVID-19. At \$5,500 it is cheaper than a cremation, and competitors like Return Home are already undercutting that at \$3,800 for a basic NOR.

Herland Forest in Wahkiacus has created a permaculture cemetery delivering the same service, but off-grid with the option of onsite interment in a natural burial. One can be composted in rotating cradles and staged in barrels for delivery to a preferred application site, or composted-in-place on Herland's land.

President and Trustee Walt Patrick told Oregon's KOIN News, "We call the persons here guardians, because their presence here ensures that this land will not be developed." While the sentiment is admirable, it bears mentioning that generations of indigenous Americans and expatriated Africans have experienced otherwise.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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