

Natural Burial

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Most people don't want to think about death. But before you turn away, please let me describe to you three different scenes.

A wildflower meadow, early May, brilliant with bright buttercups, the purple pinks of common vetch, the first big white oxeye daisies, tall foxtails, red clover, meadow brown butterflies, brimstones, heavy bumblebees, honey bees and hoverflies – and making their way along a grassy path mown through the flowers, four women gently pulling a big-wheeled wooden coffin bier, the woven-willow coffin of their much-loved mother upon it. She'd always told them she just wanted to be “left to sleep in the wildflowers.”

Another: with Bob Dylan playing, a group of friends in their sixties and seventies, laugh and chatter, a glass of Prosecco in one hand, a felt-tip pen in the other, and in the centre of their gathering, a dear friend, laid out in layers of simple cotton in a large brown cardboard coffin. Not long ago it was plain brown, but slowly it is transforming as messages are written, a joke warmly shared, familiar stories retold, a cartoon here, a fox drawn there, exclamation marks, kisses, a sketch of the field maple that'll be planted on his grave. He never wanted a funeral ‘service.’ He wasn't that sort of man.

Another: everyone wants to have a go, taking a shovel, pushing it into the heavy soil, letting it slide into the grave. The brother gives it all he can, in his late sixties, mud on his shoes, on his suit. The son is sitting in the grass playing a guitar, an older fellow beside him running a harmonica along his lips, a few women singing, an old folk tune. Others stand in small groups, talking of ‘dad’ – there's laughter,

weeping, and family news. A few of the older grandchildren have wandered down to the pond, but one, perhaps four years old, takes a clod of earth in his hands and hurls it into the grave, a look of on his face that tells the world that what he's involved in is of great importance.

I could carry on all day, for I've been to the interments of all but a handful of the nearly 800 individuals laid to rest here at Sun Rising, our natural burial ground and Nature reserve.

Of course, it is a choice to be that involved in a funeral. The point is: it can feel like a brave choice, because in so many ways death is kept at arm's length in our culture. And while I support free choice, I'm saddened and frustrated when choices are made from a base of poor information, of fear or lack of support.

In Britain, although nearly two thirds state they'd like to die at home, just 20% do. Almost as many die in care homes. Few want to die in hospital, but well over half of us do, and a significant number of those do so because of a lack of social or family care, not a medical need. When so much of our *dying* has been handed over to the professionals, it isn't surprising that we do the same when *death* finally comes – we call in the funeral director. Foggy with grief, we let them advise and we buy what they're selling: for the majority that's an MDF wood-veneered coffin, big black hearse and limousines, a minister or celebrant to do all the talking, and cremation. It's simple and straight-forward for the funeral director, with the largest mark-ups for the best profits. And for a culture for which death is difficult, cremation seems like the clean solution; it's the arm's-length solution.



A natural burial ground offers a totally different experience. Fundamentally, natural burial is about Nature, Nature in all its myriad colours. It encourages us to be a part of Nature, in life and in death. There are no straight lines and tidy boxes in Nature.

Natural burial is about Nature, environmentally. Most natural burial grounds have clear environmental ethics. While some will offer the option of interring cremated remains, by their very nature they advocate for burial not cremation. Crematoria use huge amounts of fuel, and efforts to reduce their pollution only mean increased temperatures and burn times, and thus fuel use too. Burial has no comparable pollution. In a biodegradable coffin or shroud, we are laid into the earth, effectively capturing carbon instead of releasing a vast amount more into the atmosphere.

Furthermore, a natural burial ground is unlikely to offer the option of scattering ashes. Not only are crematoria polluting, but ashes are also a serious source of pollution. Scattered in wild places, ashes kill wildflowers, destroying ecosystems.

We might say natural burial is about Nature in spiritual terms too. At a natural burial ground there isn't the option of a big 'look at me' headstone. Some do allow plaques in stone or wood, but the more important memorial is the developing ecosystem, the green space, the meadow, the woodland, the Nature reserve.

As such, at a natural burial ground it is easier to let go of the ego, of the self, of life. While the idea may be alarming to someone in their prime, asserting their prowess and achievements, as we grow older or otherwise closer to death, for the majority the ability to reach such a point is a very welcome release. There are many who visit Sun Rising anticipating their own passing from life, who comment how the peace makes it hard to leave. "May as well stay while I'm here ...". In other words, it helps us to die in peace, knowing we'll be laid to rest in a place of such natural peace.

For myself, and many others though they may use different terminology, natural burial is about Nature metaphysically as well. Most natural burial grounds are not consecrated, but instead welcome people of all faiths, traditions and beliefs. At Sun Rising, the majority seem to define themselves in that way so common to the rural English: they believe in god but not the church. Their understanding of god is best explained with the casual movement of a hand, a wave that says, "this," the wildflowers and butterflies, the wide skies and birdsong. God is Nature, Nature is god: the wholeness, the beauty, the incomprehensible mystery of it all. We come from that unknowable place, a mind awakening to itself out of the whole, and to return at death is a glorious and entirely natural adventure of release.

In a natural burial ground, and particularly a Nature reserve burial ground like Sun Rising, the cycle of the seasons is acutely evident. In a garden, a park or cemetery, non-native trees and plants allow for colours all year round, but in Nature, here in the heart of England, in winter the trees are bare, the meadow looks almost barren. It can look as raw as we feel when a loved one has died. But the wild primroses begin to flower, snug in the muddy grass, then snowdrops, delicate and self-effacing, pure white. Gradually spring creeps in, with the wild daffodil, the cowslips and lesser celandines, the catkins on the alder, hazel and birch, the pussy willow, and the first leaves open on the honeysuckle and hazel. When summer comes, bringing so many pinks, purples and blues, we can't help but be inspired. And at harvest time, the meadows are cut, the guelder rose leaves turning burgundy, the sunset each evening earlier and a richer gold, until the field maples are all coppers and bronze. As leaf fall comes, we learn from this too, this gentle lead that Nature takes: it is a necessary part of life to let go. Spring will come again.

Finally, natural burial is a decision that can be made rationally. Some say cremation is the answer in an overpopulated world, because the land should be 'for the living', but what they mean is 'for human beings'. A properly protected natural burial ground secures land for the living: as a haven for wildlife in this increasingly developed landscape, and as a sanctuary for people, those seeking peace.

Leaving clear instructions as to what we would like for ourselves when we die is a truly valuable gift to those who will have to pick up the pieces. Choosing natural burial is a further gift – to the planet and our descendants.

There are natural burial grounds all over the British Isles now, the idea spreading around the world. If these words have inspired you, do visit a few. They are all very different: managed differently and on different soil. You're welcome to meander through our own website; it's at www.sunrisingburialground.co.uk

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Emma Restall Orr is a teacher, philosopher, poet, priest and author of a dozen books, including *Living Druidry* (Piatkus, 2004), *Living With Honor: A Pagan Ethics* (O Books, 2007), and *Kissing The Hag* (O Books, 2009). She also authored a chapter of our own book *GreenSpirit: Path to a New consciousness* (2010). Joint Chief of the British Druid Order for nine years, and founder of the Druid Network and Honoring The Ancient Dead, a group advocating for the respectful treatment of ancient human remains, Emma now runs the Sun Rising burial ground: www.sunrisingburialground.co.uk