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A Quaker Guide to Birdwatching
My Dad's Green Burial
Planting Ourselves in Time and Place

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My Dad's Green Burial

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Photos courtesy of the author

How We Chose a Meaningful Resting Place

I am not alone.
I am one with all the Earth.
What an adventure!

—*Edward Ashley*

Dad died this past summer. Instead of a churchyard burial, he rests in the middle of a meadow filled with six-foot-tall wildflowers, hovering bees, mooing cows, and songbirds. Dad's body was wrapped in his mother's quilt that had the words "Sweet Dreams." His grandchildren carried the body, which was wrapped in a shroud and placed on a board, and they used ropes to gently lower him into a shallow grave.

Family and friends threw wildflowers picked from the meadow onto his body. Afterward, three grandsons shoveled about three tons of dirt onto his flower-

covered body. Dad's body lies in an unmarked grave in a conservation cemetery, where the grasses and tall groves of wildflowers take over his plot. Only GPS coordinates locate his remains.



Author's father in Saxapahaw, N.C., where he lived for the last year and a half of his life.

No Ready Burial Ground

Setting aside the idea of burial within a churchyard or military burial ground can be a monumental leap for a family. As ours decided on a green burial within a conservation cemetery, we embraced the possibility of the wild, open space of nature. For regular Sunday churchgoers raised in a formal faith structure, this ceremony was very different from the priest-led devotional liturgy and the songs, blessings, and ceremonial faith structures that bookend sacred moments. Baptism, confirmation, weddings, and funerals are standard appointed times for the church community to individually and collectively encounter God. As many questions emerged in the weeks before Dad's death, our family

actively engaged in "worldmaking": we felt we were creating a unique, sacred space. The meadow was a world where Dad could rest after death and where we could feel connected to both his and our collective stories, and open to the great story beyond this one. My family embraced the act of questioning where to place our loved ones after life.

In light of these profound questions, more families—religious as well as nonreligious—are exploring alternative burial plans and rejecting passive acceptance of "the way things are." Sacred burial sites now extend beyond religious buildings and grounds; other places can now qualify as sites where families can opt to memorialize their dead loved ones. Families are rethinking the nature of the sacred: where and how it is expressed and what its role and value might be after death and for the living left behind.

For those lucky enough to live in North Carolina, state regulations permit families to pursue alternative burial options called "green burials." A green burial place is dedicated to following specific protocol and may be part of a cemetery or a new area altogether. Green burial involves the use of the overall ecological well-being of the land. For some, environmental concerns and questions about health hazards influence people to choose a green burial. The standard conventional funeral, complete with embalming and burial in a lawn cemetery, is fraught with health hazards, thereby requiring

the permanent installation of non-biodegradable vaults around non-biodegradable caskets. In green burials, embalming is forbidden and natural decomposition of the body is encouraged with a more shallow grave.

As the public demands access to more information about the resulting health risks associated with crematorium pollutants, questions arise, such as “Is there a safe level of exposure to mercury?” With no Environmental Protection Agency oversight and with increasing public awareness surrounding environmental health concerns, preservation and restoration of local lands, and concern over rising costs of funeral products and productions, green burials are becoming an increasingly attractive option.

While Dad was less interested in the politics and economics of green burial, he quickly became interested in the ecology of the conservation cemetery. Dad saw humans as part of God’s total creation and nature a manifestation of God’s presence. We engaged in a process of nurturing deep care for God’s creation while we planned to bury Dad within a green conservation cemetery. Mom and I chose Dad’s final resting place eight hours before he died; we rested well knowing Dad’s future burial would be in a place of spirit-nurturing, transformative beauty.



Wildflowers collected in the fields near the burial site.

Creating Space for Death and Memorialization

The last week of Dad’s life saw us asking a new whole line of questioning about burial places. Earlier in the year, my parents and I visited a half dozen church graveyards as potential final resting places. I suggested that none of the children and grandchildren would be eager to visit a churchyard that held no real connection for my parents. The decision needed to be made soon now that Dad was dying: he desperately wanted to know where his wife would eventually join him after death. The churchyard cemetery’s purpose of memorializing people and even serving as a cultural marker of history did not fill him with comfort, especially when considering that he

might be buried in a random cemetery. As a past marine, the military burial ground—a free option for both him and Mom—wasn’t interesting. Neither of them felt any kind of attachment to nationalistic fervor or the armed services. Ultimately, both wanted to know that their children and grandchildren would visit them after their deaths.

Dad, Mom, and I seriously questioned any remaining options for Dad's final resting ground. They had no religious roots in any of the churches they had visited over the past year, and we all agreed: wherever Dad would be buried, Mom would eventually follow. We needed to find a burial place that could include Dad's history, provide the family with connection and continuity, and inspire a sense of the sacred. Ultimately we were searching for a burial ground that would serve as some kind of reverential and awe-inspiring place: literally and figuratively rooting Edward Ashley and his family in the years to come.

My father was vivaciously curious about the beauty of existence, and he was deeply connected to the story of God's love in all of creation. In *The Common Good and the Global Emergency: God and the Built Environment*, T. J. Gorringer writes: "Places of transformative beauty—places which inspire, motivate, give meaning and fulfillment—are spirit nurturing." In the last week of Dad's life, after having visited one of 13 green conservation cemeteries in the country, he and my mom decided to make their final resting place in a natural environment. They had allowed for what Gorringer describes as "a kind of interior pilgrimage" to take place. And it felt like a miracle that the closest green burial site to our location was a conservation cemetery. It seemed strange to Dad that meadows and woodlands might serve as a burial ground, operating under the premise that nature and natural growth eventually obscure burial spots.

Dad hung onto the sides of the four-seater cart as we spun around the acreage through the woods and surrounding meadow teeming with life; we talked about a kind of sacred sensibility of green burials. In the drive up to and around the 87 acres, he noted a kind of felt "sacred anticipation" as he searched for signs that people were resting within the beautiful landscape of woodlands and meadows. Visitors walking through the woods on well-made trails were all part of this life cycle. Dad appreciated how the conservation cemetery centered the social and community value of people individually and collectively, so that the celebrations of loved ones were engaging and inseparable from the place. The conservation cemetery offers opportunities for families and volunteers to forge ongoing relationships with the physical environment through Friday workdays (for trail making, gravedigging, wildflower picking, and volunteering during funeral services) and offers them a physical way to live out their moral and social values.

In an article for Oxford's *Literature and Theology* journal titled "Embodying the Artistic Spirit and the Prophetic Arts," Willie James Jennings writes:

To consume is holy work. It is tied to life. But what happens when it becomes bound to death? I do not mean the death of that which must be consumed,

but consumption that conceals death's operations, consumption that isolates us from one another, and leaves us alone in our hungers.

In the world of green burials, there is a pragmatic release and liberation from the increasingly business-centered burials of funeral homes. The end result of those burial practices—largely for monetizing purposes—has served to disconnect folks from the raw rites of passage with their loved one. It is right and good that contemporary families question the mode of consumption that impedes and denies the human species' natural connection to the lives and deaths of other humans, as well as from nature and creation.

In the business of death and burials today, there can be a kind of denial and detachment about the realness and naturalness of dying, as if we could separate this moment from creation: from the life and death cycle of abiding reality. It was this curiosity and wonder about life and living, creation and God, that brought Dad to tour the Bluestem Conservation Cemetery, a mere six days before his death. There was a mindful practice of presence as we spun through the trails, looking for possible burial spots for Dad and Mom. We recognized a series of feelings: grief, hope, love, connection, and loss. There was hopefulness hiding in the beauty of nature, and it was powerfully invigorating. My family and I experienced a “vision of the sacramentality of the world which is not sentimental,” as Friend Steve Chase writes in *Nature as Spiritual Practice*. The nature of space matters.

Green burial is a way to care for the deceased beloved in the most natural manner possible. With no box or embalming fluids, it allows for a burial with minimal environmental impact. My family eventually found peace and value in burying Dad in his mother's quilt and laying him directly in the earth without a casket. With Dad simply returning to the earth, the family found comfort in the idea that Dad's burial would also aid in the restoration and preservation of the local habitat as well as aid in the conservation of the acreage for the next one hundred years.



Christine Ashley began her journey among Friends as a Quaker educator in Virginia, Maryland, and Iowa. She worked as FCNL's Quaker field secretary for five years, lifting up spaces for f/Friends to engage in federal policy and advocacy opportunities. Today, Christine organizes statewide issues and electoral politics in North Carolina, and she is a second-year MDiv student at Earlham School of Religion.