

The Art of Goodbye: A Closer Look at Emerging Trends in End-of-Life Rituals¹

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Each year in a diverse United States, 2.5 million people die (CDC, 2017). Naturally, a one-size-fits-all final goodbye does not exist. With increased access to information, survivors as consumers are seeking more alternatives to the conventional funeral. For some, tradition continues to inform, but for others, options are evolving and forming new possibilities.

Creativity may be the impetus for certain variations, but budget is a factor for others. In 2017, the national median cost of an adult funeral with burial was \$7,360 (National Funeral Directors Association, 2018b). Funerals are among the most expensive purchases made in a lifetime. Individuals and families may have scant knowledge of the process due to a lack of experience. Time constraints (unless pre-planning has been established) and decision-making during a period of duress, grief, and guilt can result in missteps and overspending.

Home Funerals

Some people still prefer support from a funeral home because professionals have more experience with details, including legal requirements. However, times are changing, and funeral homes and professionals are responding to shifting trends by working with loved ones to offer a more organic way of saying goodbye. In some instances, family and friends take on the whole task without assistance from funeral professionals. Choosing a home funeral gives survivors more control over decision-making. The terms

home funerals, family-directed funerals, and home-based funerals are used interchangeably.

Home funerals are legal in every state, but most people are unaware that these funerals are an option. In most states, consumers are not required to use a funeral home to plan and conduct a funeral (Federal Trade Commission, 2012a). According to the Funeral Rule, consumers have the right to purchase only the goods and services they want. This makes it possible to opt out of professional services altogether, except in the nine states that require consumers to hire and pay for assistance from a funeral home. These states are Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New York, and New Jersey (Federal Trade Commission, 2012a).

State law does not require embalming for all deaths (Federal Trade Commission, 2012a). Loved ones may opt to use freezer packs in lieu of embalming. Some states do require embalming or refrigeration if the body is not buried or cremated within a certain timeframe, but other states do not require it at all (Federal Trade Commission, 2012a). If a home funeral is preferable, the body is brought directly to the home. Home funerals may also include transporting the body to the cemetery and completing the state-mandated paperwork (Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, n.d.).

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Preparing the Body

At its core, a home funeral allows more time for visiting, caring for the body, viewing, grieving, and closure. Home care of the body includes grooming such as bathing and adorning. For some survivors, preparing the body presents an opportunity for a final loving and respectful connection with their dearly departed.

Certified Celebrants

Fewer families are integrating religion into memorial services (National Funeral Directors Association, 2018a). In response to societal changes, funeral directors are becoming trained as, or are seeking the services of, a certified funeral celebrant or other death professionals to fill the gap. These professionals are trained to facilitate a few elements or the entire process, including family meetings and grief support. A funeral celebrant's service to the survivors might include overseeing an end-of-life ritual that may include music, readings, displays, storyboards, and multimedia productions. Celebrants are trained to use the most appropriate means to memorialize the life of the deceased.

Green or Natural Burial

The Green Burial Council established the first set of standards for eco-friendly burials and burial grounds in 2005. The Council's standards are meant to help care for the dead with minimal environmental impact, conserve natural resources, and promote the restoration or preservation of natural habitats (Green Burial Council, n.d.).

Growing pressures to keep costs down, personalize a final goodbye, and take control of final planning are all impetuses for simpler send-offs such as green or natural burials. In much the same way as modern funerals made way for cremation, green funerals have become an alternative option for a final goodbye.

Natural or green burial can accurately be described as traditional burial because its methods have a history of thousands of years of practice, and it was the standard burial method in the United States before the Civil War (Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, n.d.). Green burial does not degrade an ecosystem and it greatly reduces costs, as evidenced by the simplicity of the process. Basic defining characteristics include no embalming and no vault. Any container that is used must be composed solely of biodegradable materials (Green Burial Council, n.d.).

Concern for the environment factors heavily into this approach, but cost can also influence decision-making.

The average casket retails for more than \$2,000, but more elaborate versions constructed with mahogany, bronze, or copper can retail for as much as \$10,000 (Federal Trade Commission, 2012b). In natural burial, a pine or cardboard box can suffice for a vessel. A shroud is optional, but if one is used, it is made of an organic fiber, such as unbleached linen or cotton. The body is wrapped and laid to rest in a hand-dug grave (Green Burial Council, n.d.).

A shallow grave used in a green burial allows for microbial activity similar to composting. Interment does not inhibit decomposition; it allows the body to recycle naturally. The casket or urn is constructed from nontoxic and readily biodegradable materials. A burial vault or outer burial container is not used because it impedes the body's contact with soil (Green Burial Council, n.d.).

An advanced option is conservation burial, in which a portion of the burial fee goes to preserve and manage the natural burial ground as a living memorial under the perpetual protection of a conservation easement. Committed burial fees pay for land acquisition, protection, and restoration (Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery, n.d.).



Figure 1.
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Researching the Laws in Your State

The Federal Trade Commission regulates funerals at a federal level (Federal Trade Commission, 2012a), but individual states also have governance over specific aspects of the process. In Florida, the death care industry falls under the Chief Financial Officer for the Department of Consumer Affairs. Consumers, applicants, and licensees can review rules and regulations specific to the state of Florida at <https://myfloridacfo.com/Division/FuneralCemetery/StatutesandRules.htm>.

When a person dies, a death certificate must be issued. Find out who can obtain the certificate and which transport documents and other after-death documents are required. Your local health department and your state department of health are reliable sources of information. Take care to follow the letter of the law, but proceed knowing you have the right to pursue a personalized and meaningful goodbye that brings loved ones satisfaction and peace.

Conclusion

Life is finite, but having a say in how we say goodbye presents an opportunity to provide meaning, comfort, and peace to those we leave behind. Consider exploring traditional as well as emerging trends to determine the best way to plan a satisfying final goodbye. For more information on end-of-life issues, visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_eole.

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