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GreenQuandaries

Green Quandaries are those moments in life when you want to do the eco-friendly thing, but you're just not sure what that is. They are the moments when you try your best to be conscientious but someone, some cultural habit, or some other event gets in your way.



WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2007

Not for the Squeamish

So I don't want to get too morbid or gross on anyone, but I've been reading about an interesting aspect of green living that doesn't come up much (at least it hasn't around me): Death.

I recently read the book *[Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial](#)*. Before you get all concerned, yes I did actually pick it up randomly off the library shelf and just read it. It wasn't assigned for a class or anything. BUT it does contain some interesting information on how the modern funeral came to be and gives a good background on burial customs throughout American history and sometimes other places. I'm always up for anything that has a little history and a little environmental mixed together. Plus it's by an environmental journalist, Mark Harris, so the style is quick and readable. The one warning that I would give, though, is that if you are at all squeamish, skip the first two chapters about the modern funeral industry. He is clearly making a point and he makes it by laying out all the gross details. I'm not usually that faint of heart but it made even me cringe a lot.

So anyway, it got me thinking a lot. Not so much about death as about those environmentally destructive practices that seem "necessary" or "inevitable." Embalming, for instance, turns out to have some fairly serious implications as thousands of formaldehyde-drenched bodies are placed in the earth each day in this country. Formaldehyde is considered by the EPA to be a toxic waste substance and as such its disposal is monitored. And yet, as Harris points out, hundreds of thousands of gallons of formaldehyde are buried into the earth, in concentrated areas (cemeteries) every year with little to no HAZMAT restrictions. As much as some people (not me, actually) would like to think otherwise, no matter how many layers of metal or concrete you encase the deceased in, he/she will eventually decay and return to the earth -- formaldehyde and all.

The more common criticism of modern burials is, of course, the fact that it takes up so much land. Not only does it make the land unusable for humans, but because it is just one big cultivated (and heavily fertilized) lawn, there aren't many plant or animal species that get to use the land either. Now, I'm not knocking cemeteries. I find

Quote of the Moment

"If you're going to drive around in a big ol' Hummer and then buy carbon offsets to mitigate that, that's like getting drunk on the weekends and throwing some money through the window of an AA meeting and thinking you're doing something," -- Ed Begley Jr, actor and environmental campaigner.

Who Wrote that Post?

I've invited some friends with different perspectives (or living in different regions) to post some thoughts on Green Quandaries as well. If you see a post in [blue](#) it is by BlueTurtle84. If others decide to post, they will have their own colors too. I hope that you enjoy the new range of voices!

You might want to check these out:

"The Art of Simple Food",
Alice Waters

"The Omnivore's Dilemma:
A Natural History of Four
Meals", Michael Pollan

"Animal, Vegetable,
Mineral: A Year of Food
Life", Barbara Kingsolver

"True Green: 100 everyday
ways you can contribute to
a healthier planet", Kim
McKay and Jenny Bonnin

"Living Green: A Practical
Guide to Sustainability",
Greg Horn

Cool Websites

Dine Green (Listing of
Certified Green
Restaraunts)

Live Green, Save Green