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BEST SENDOFFS

A Watery Repose

by Joyce Gemperlein

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Chris Krause hears from many people who say they want to be buried at sea, but especially remembers the e-mail from a fellow who described what he called a Viking funeral featuring a long boat set on fire offshore with his body aboard.

"I'm, like, OK! But then he never contacted me again," says Krause wistfully.

"Even though people have cool ideas for funerals, we think their families talk them out of it," says Krause, technology officer for Nature's Passage, a two-year-old company that promises it can take on simple to difficult disposal tasks -- from scattering cremains mailed to their Amityville, N.Y., headquarters into any ocean, to taking a party boat filled with friends, relatives and canapés to witness the scattering of the ashes of a dog who loved to play in the surf, to the sinking of the casket or weighted sailcloth shroud of an inveterate yachtsman 80 miles out at sea.

There's no time like the present for resurrecting the ancient rite of burial at sea -- what with aging hippies; a new emphasis on preplanning funerals, enabling people to get revenge on their relatives with wild disposal requests; a steady rise in cremation rates; and a loosening of adherence to religious guidelines.

The idea also goes hand-in-hand with Americans' newfound skill at finding startling things to do with cremains. Remember the fireworks that accompanied gonzo writer Hunter Thompson's ashes as they were fired from a cannon on a tower? Or the process that makes diamonds out of carbon recovered from human remains?

And then there's the current onslaught of eco-this and eco-that products and conversations arguing against anyone controlling a 12-by-6-foot piece of lawn forever.

Research compiled for the Cremation Association of North America shows a rise in remains scattered or cast into the sea. Now the ashes of nearly 60 percent of people cremated and up in or on water.

Logically, nonswimmers, people allergic to seafood and people who fear sharks or get seasick can't abide the thought of a wet resting place. But proprietors of companies such as Nature's Passage are gambling that there are enough environmentalists and people who love water sports or view the seas as tranquil to want to take those sentiments to the hereafter.



Lars Hedstrom, owner of Nature's Passage, U.S. merchant marine captain and a retired Army colonel, says he has ships standing at the ready around the world to sink caskets or bodies in shrouds in the required minimum depth of 600 feet -- that's 65 to 80 miles off Long Island, a day's trip one way by his reckoning. He says he is the only service in the country permitted to do so.

Perhaps because of the time -- and so the cost -- involved, Nature's Passage doesn't perform very many full-body sea burials. Like most companies, most clients are cremated and scattered upon or sunk into the ocean. This can

cost as little as \$100.

(Members of the U.S. military, veterans and family members are eligible to be buried at sea or have their ashes strewn by the U.S. Navy, tasks wedged into other duties while ships are on the ocean.)

"In-ground burial is silly. I'm a soldier for the planet, first and foremost," says Hedstrom, who appears to be alone in reminding AARP members of their age by offering them a 25 percent discount.

Hedstrom's environmental angle on death is shared by many companies.

For example, George Frankel, CEO of Eternal Reefs, says his company has recently been bombarded with requests for information about becoming a dead environmental volunteer.

For between \$2,500 and \$6,500, Eternal Reefs incorporates the cremated remains of humans and/or their pets into the cement used to make reef balls, which are spheres with holes in them that are sunk in the ocean to encourage the growth of coral and fish populations and establish breakwaters.

So far, some 700 reef balls made with the remains of humans and pets are helping to fight the deterioration of underwater ecosystems, Frankel says. The reef ball bears the name of the loved one on a plaque.

In less fancy fashion, The Neptune Society has been cremating the deceased and scattering about half of those

clients on the sea since 1973, says Steven Skiles, funeral director at the nonprofit society's main office in Sherman Oaks, Ca.



Despite new competition, Skiles says that business has steadily climbed over the last decade, and the society now scatters about 100 parcels of ashes at sea every month.

This is not to say that The Neptune Society has been immune to looking for fresh ideas.

It has partnered with a diving attraction/art gallery/breakwater/marine research center/scrapbook/underwater cemetery that lies in the ocean 3.25 miles east of Key Biscayne, Fla.

The first phase of The Atlantic Reef Project, dubbed "A City for Eternity," opened in February 2007. The brainchild of Gary Levine, an entrepreneur and scuba diver, it is his vision of the legendary and perhaps mythical lost city of Atlantis, described by Plato 2,000 years ago as a utopia of wealth, beauty and civilization.

The underwater city will be composed of a collection of bronze and concrete sculptures and arches that contain human ashes – or any other keepsake that a purchaser might deem worthy of saving.

Some watery gambits haven't panned out.

A spokesperson for Gulfstream Burial at Sea of Jupiter, Fla., for example, concedes that its idea of placing the ashes of deceased inveterate travelers in motion around the globe via the swift Atlantic Ocean current hasn't caught on despite a colorful map on the company's website showing that loved ones would drift among the coral reefs of Belize before surfing on to the beaches of Portugal.

Of course, many people have neither the environment nor travel in mind when they entrust their relatives' ashes to the sea.

Bob Klein's parents, Ben and Edna, died within five months of each other. They were childhood sweethearts and had been married 73 years. They had told their son repeatedly that they wanted to be cremated, have their ashes combined and spread off a beach where they had spent every summer for more than 50 years.

On June 23, 2007, Bob Klein and friends and relatives of his parents boarded one of Hedstrom's boats and watched as a container that dissolves was placed in Long Island Sound. Foods, drink, humorous and sentimental anecdotes about the couple were served up on that sunny but temperate day.

"It was a wonderful farewell," says Klein, "deeply moving and done with great dignity."

Joyce Gemperlein is a regular contributor to Obit.

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