

Ask the Undertaker

The Not So Traditional

By Ryan Helfenbein

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Remember as a youngster when your parents said something like, "When I was your age, I walked to school in the snow uphill, both ways!" If you take a moment and really think about it, they were right about change. It's amazing how fast things have changed in our society today and how quickly people can adapt to that popular product or service. Pay phones have become cellular phones, hand-written birthday cards have become e-cards and bunny ears for television reception have been replaced with a satellite dish attached to the side of our house. We see this change in the undertaker's profession as well. This is apparent in the shift of popularity from traditional burial to cremation tributes. Not only has this taken society today by surprise as a popular means of disposition, but it has completely shocked the average undertaker.

Cremation services date back many years, but they have only really become popular in our country in the last 10 to 20 years. In the 1970s, only 3.5 percent of people chose cremation. Today, more than 40 percent of Americans are opting for cremation. As a matter of fact, the National Funeral Directors Association predicts that this average will be over 50 percent in 10 years. This means that the traditional services undertakers have been providing since the Civil War have been completely changed in about one-fourth of that time.

Why are more and more people choosing cremation? Many consumer surveys have been conducted, and there seem to be two main reasons that are at the top: use of land and cost.

Todd Van Beck, a family friend, has studied the one aspect of using up too much land. He found that if everyone in the world

died at the exact same time and each person elected for traditional burial, the space required would be almost 7,813 square miles of land. By the way, this is a bit smaller than the state of Massachusetts. But is land use the average consumer's real concern? Perhaps not.

What about cost then? Yes, cremation can be less costly than traditional burial, but it all depends on what the consumer selects. For example, someone who wants to be buried immediately in a no-frills casket will pay much less than someone who wants a memorial service at the Chesapeake Bay Beach Club. Unfortunately, some funeral directors of today really aren't helping with this either. If you contact a funeral home and ask what their cost of cremation is, they'll tell you the bare-bones cost but when you go in to meet with them, that cost will rise as "necessary items" are added to the list. Why can't a funeral home simply give you an all-inclusive price? More progressive firms are providing all inclusive, one-price tribute packages, but unfortunately, most of them don't.

If land use and cost aren't necessarily driving the whole cremation trend, I have another answer. Cremation can offer a multitude of personalized services that truly encompass the highlights of an individual's life and provide a unique way to remember the life that person lived. For example, if dad was a fisherman, you could have a private scattering farewell tribute in the Atlantic Ocean. Or you could place portions of his cremated remains in the areas up and down the East Coast at specific locations where he enjoyed fishing. Perhaps you may even want to do what one Marylander I know has planned: Hold a memorial tribute and then see that his cremated remains are placed in the mold

of a new sailboat that his wife and children could then sail along the coast line. Whatever form of memorialization that may fit your personality and highlight your life, cremation tributes provide families with a positive remembrance.

Why can't one have a personalized traditional burial tribute as well? You can. The difference is in the flexibility that cremation tributes offer. For example, the urn could be placed on the center of a favorite bar where everyone gathers for a final toast, or a capsule of cremains could be sent into outer space or one could even hold a scattering tribute while on a cruise to the Virgin Islands. Whether it be an eternal resting place on the ocean floor or into the stars above, cremation simply provides more unique tribute options than we have ever experienced before.

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