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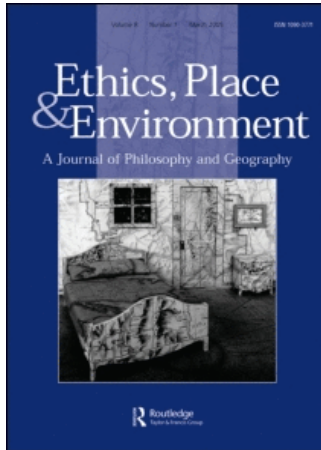
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Death to Life: Towards My Green Burial

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ABSTRACT *This paper presents reflections on the author's death aspirations as they are informed by a set of earth-connection stories, environmental concepts, and modernist burial practices. This weave is meant to inspire further consideration on what is coming to be known as 'green burial'. More precisely, this means an exploration of the author's earth-centred burial musings in association with the following themes: the meanings and historical trajectory of prevailing death and burial practices; 'narratives' of the human–earth life-cycle; relevant environmental ethics and place literature concepts; and lastly, some sense of the newly emerging practices and appeals to green burial—i.e. the normative and practical grounds for rethinking and working toward more environmentally sensitive burial practices. This weave of themes is instructive for posing green burial as evocative of a more comprehensive and spiritual ethos of connection, continuity, and responsibility. In this sense, rather than being seen as contrary or contentious, green burial may actually enable us to dispel some of the growing angst, uncertainty, and insensitivity often underlying prevailing burial practices, while contributing to an emerging environmental consciousness.*

Introduction

I begin these reflections on the case for encouraging a more environmentally sensitive ethos of death and burial by sharing a moment within the larger story that I carry of my own death.

Demise on the Shores

With my life force spent and my body slumped against a gnarled pine-tree on the pre-Cambrian shield near the lake, carrion tear at, and flies lay their eggs in, my decaying flesh, while my fluids slowly drain into the cracks in the ancient rock to enter the roots of that same tree against which I exhaled my last breath.[1]

I expand on the memorialization aspects of this death scenario near the end of this paper, but want to begin with a few more general thoughts about death and burial to initiate this discussion. Death is universally conceived as a time of search for meaning and significance. The rituals around death and burial practices have their origins in social needs to create spaces of contemplation and to remember and celebrate a life. They provide a time for community and those affiliated with the

deceased to find solace—an integrally social aspect of the death-moment. It is the quest for some sort of meaning and understanding about ourselves and our world that most captures the spirit of death and burial rituals.

Though death is generally an event of which we hold some innate fear and anxiety, it is also something, human technological aspirations notwithstanding, to which all creatures succumb and to which we attach great significance. Our worldviews are indelibly inscribed by the life–death cycle, so it follows that concepts and stories of death are central to our mythologies, our speculation about the world, and our identity and place in it. We have all experienced others' deaths or imagined our own in some shape or form, and our worldly experiences are sharpened profoundly by the ever-present knowledge of the life/death dialectic that ultimately defines our existence. And, as we grow older, it is likely that our personal imaginings become in some way more concrete and real for us.

The themes that I examine in this paper relative to my own death scenario are centred on what I am calling 'stories of the human–earth life-cycle', and include the widespread influence of modernity on death and burial practices; environmental ethics and sense-of-place concepts; and emerging green burial practices. This convergence of concepts, ideas, and practices informs and provides context for this imagined demise, and presents some initial configuration of ethical and other considerations for moving towards both understanding and acceptance of green burial.

Re-conceiving Death and Burial

It is fair to speculate that we do not often conceive of the future of the body and its post-burial phase within the earth.[2] That is, we carry with us, in most instances, largely static images of a relative or friend, for example, who has been *laid to rest*—perhaps with a lingering image of this person in a finely lacquered and exotic wooden casket in the grave, or of ashes contained in a vase secured for this purpose. The funeral experience is an occasion for revisiting (and reworking) memories of the life-story of the person who has died, but our conceptions of the life–death cycle commonly end there, with a focus on the enduring life-images of the person who has *departed*. When we think of 'life after death', we are primarily thinking of the soul, not of the body.

What I hold out here is that our sensibilities have developed out of historically constituted portrayals of death as a time of apprehension, quandary, and as an alienating experience—one *not of this earth*. This is probably quite natural given that survival is a base instinct, as is fear of the unknown. The afterlife appeal in significant ways is a cultural-religious construction and antidote to this uncertainty—a place *outside* of the regular world that we inhabit in life.

> Will the circle be unbroken, by and by Lord by and by,
> There's a better home a-waiting, in the sky Lord in the sky. (Habershon, 1907)

Hence, the prevailing cultural construction of death and burial rituals largely neglects or excludes portrayals regarding the corporeal facts that follow our death, and it rarely associates them with ecological processes. If there is *continuity* or

movement in our images regarding the person who has died, it most often entertains only one aspect of this transition: the part where a soul or spirit 'moves towards the light' and, perhaps, is united with an *otherworld* entity.

The customary Christian image, for instance, portrays our lives and our ends as ultimately *not of*, or aspiring to this earthly place (a *fallen order* according to some reading of the Christian scriptures). This religious imagery arises from doctrine that has one transcending this world, and seeking unification with a separate and higher entity once we die. What we generally meet at this juncture is religious beliefs that instruct around some manner of *beyond*, meaning a kind of spiritual or unearthly world above, apart, or outside of this earthly one. In this vein, they are also largely devoid of the kind of responsibility or consciousness to which I am directing this work.

What I hold as critical is a need for humanity more consciously to sort through the *corporeal component of this transition* and its ties to the earth of which we are constituent elements. As prevailing cosmologies do not commonly include a discernible image of the place or function of our remains—the body—this paper advocates for a need to work through and transcend this neglect. The 'you are dust and to dust you shall return' idiom has some utility in this examination for a more holistic nature–human ethic extolling ecologically oriented burial practices. For instance, we see in recent writings where more ecologically oriented interpretations of Christian thought begin to accommodate this kind of rethinking (see Peterson, 2000, for example). It is certainly the case that our burial rituals include some manner of this recognition—the throwing of a handful of earth on the coffin as it is lowered is symbolic of this. But it is, to all intents and purposes, a minor component of the orientation of the contemporary death ceremony. It is held that modernist society, especially in North America, requires a reworking of the understanding and recognition of the continuity of life after death as it relates to the basic functions of the biosphere. This kind of re-orientation would be part of a set of more comprehensive and responsible ethical norms regarding *our end* and *our beginning*— ones that include the return of our bodies to the environment or non-human nature as a conscious act or practice.

Connection, Continuity, and Responsibility

> There was a farmer who struggled through successive droughts on his family's farm, year after year waiting for the rains to come to nourish his crops. Finally, in great exasperation and at the end of his wits, he wanders out into his parched fields, pleading with his god to tell him why this is happening—what has he done to deserve this suffering, and what must he do to bring life to his fields. After days of a monumental appeal to his god for some kind of help to relieve the drought, he finally kills himself—a sacrifice, and as his blood drains into the earth, the fields come to life and become green again.

The basic theme of this story—a recasting of the ancient myth of Attis and his sacrifice to the mother-earth Goddess (see Tacey, 1995)—is woven in a variety of ways into the death mythologies of older, agrarian human cultures. The concepts of *continuity*, of *connection*, and of *reciprocal responsibility* that are embedded in these

stories are critical elements of the treatise around rethinking our burial rituals and sensibilities explored in this paper, and resonate in various ways with my own story.

My death story briefly told at the beginning of the paper is one that I have imagined in generally that form over the last 30 years—admittedly one that grows in strength as my grasp on immortality diminishes. It is also one that is bound up in a sort of *reverence for life*, appropriating from Albert Schweitzer, and a commitment to what I hold to be a necessary and earth-sensitive perspective for myself. It is a narrative constituted by a profound love and sense of connection to a specific place where I spent much time as a child on the shores of a lake in northern Ontario near the town of Little Rapids in the Canadian Shield. This story of my death under the gnarled pine tree raises associations between my love of place and need for re-connection, and the proverbial 'tree of life', a universal symbol of immortality and nourishment (see Jobes, 1962). The 'world tree' can also be imagined as being in both one place and in all places simultaneously—symbolic of ecological connection and the notion that all places are interdependent. And so even though 'my place' of death is specifically at Lost Lake, in a broader sense, one which I espouse in this paper, my place is the earth. The site and this manner of demise are essential constituents in my vignette, as ecological *connection*, place and *continuity*, and a heightened level of *responsibility* are the key processes that I want my death-act to signify.[3]

My contention is that this sort of rethinking requires (among a multitude of attitudinal and behavioural shifts relative to matters of environmental degradation), consciously committing ourselves to the idea of some form of *re*integration of our bodies, our corporeal selves—the carbon, water and minerals, etc. that comprise our bodies—into the biosphere once our *life-force* leaves the body. Although in some ways a minor act, the moral content of a broad change in practice like this I believe would be telling of a critical change in consciousness.

This action of *giving ourselves back* to ecosystems and to the ecosphere generally—*re*integrating ourselves to place and ecosystem—would be one expression among many of the diverse efforts necessary to maintain and regain ecospheric integrity. Although in some ways merely symbolic given the scale of other anthropogenic disturbances visited upon the planet by humans, it has real potential significance via the gesture it suggests, and what this may mean for others witness to such death acts. I contend that shifts in our burial practices to permit the *re*immersion of our bodies in non-human nature would be both pragmatic in the short run given the visceral image of more than six billion humans dying in the next couple of generations, as well as engendering of a longer-term and more comprehensive ethical orientation to move towards and contribute to ecospheric integrity.

Extant Burial Practices and Context

As noted earlier, some form of ceremony and death commemoration practice is universal across the human species both historically and geographically (see Moller, 1996; also GSACC, 1985), and yet there are some key kinds of shifts associated with death and burial ritual over the last millennium that are critical to our understanding of the contemporary world of death and burial. If we accept the basic postulation that all peoples interpret death as a time of transition, and of questions regarding

our significance and our destiny, then we can pose some general thoughts here regarding changing social beliefs over the centuries to do with death, and do so relative to my position here on green burial.

The death and dying literature commonly underlines a transition from what is considered a largely agrarian, premodern world to the industrial and scientific one, which I will loosely label 'the modernist era' (see Howarth & Jupp, 1996). The former world, which has been labelled 'the period of the Tame Death', was one where 'human dying and death were characterised by an attitude of acceptance and tranquility. Death during this time was a communal and public act' (Moller, 1996, p. 7). As integral elements of community broadly defined, the 'public' nature of the life-world meant that not only did kin and family figure prominently in the processes of dying and death, but all of the other residents in the village or community too: 'The dying person was surrounded by the family and community. Goodbyes were exchanged, prayers said, and final instructions given to family members'. And then, 'the dying person quietly and peacefully waited for death' (Moller, 1996, p. 5).

The primary moments of transition between this period and the present are of course more complex than can be spelled out fully in this paper, but there are some key conceptual points that lend context and support to the ideas and discussion of green burial that follow, and that have their roots in some strands of Platonic ideas. In terms of some of the prevailing notions of the *hereafter* to which much of burial ritual and rites are currently oriented, there is a common underlying conception of physical places, the earth, as 'limiting'—that is, mutable, unstable, and partial. The body is also cast in this light as something transitory and impermanent (see Peterson, 2000). In this sense, the soul needs to be extricated from it at death in order to transcend these physical confines as 'the material world is without intrinsic value' (Wirzba, 2003, p. 83). Hence the common religious terminology of a *higher order* and the *otherworld* as places that are eternal, complete, and perfect.

In this light, it is useful to consider some of the changes associated with Christianity over this lengthy transition period. One of the most visible aspects of contemporary burial rites may be the largely accepted (though liturgically contentious) belief about resurrection—the rise and return of the body to heaven on the day of Judgement—and the impacts that this carries for burial practices generally.

> At the rite of final commendation and farewell, the community acknowledges the reality of separation and commends the deceased to God. In this way it recognizes the spiritual bond that still exists between the living and the dead and proclaims its belief that all the faithful will be raised up and reunited in the new heavens and a new earth, where death will be no more. (CB, 2006)

The development of the 'resurrection story' is now implicitly/explicitly built into funeral rites via the preservation of the body, such that: 'Christians . . . will rise again to face a judgement and a future destiny of eternal dimensions . . . in a promised kingdom of God' (Davies, 2005, p. 6). Davies's discussion of the concept of transcendence, with some significant shared attributes across Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, is prefaced on an enduring perception of the world as 'faulty' or of

'a lesser order'. This simplifies such biblical interpretations of course, as tensions in Christian traditions suggest that early conceptions held the 'world as good and to be cherished' (the 'stewardship' notion), which is in contrast with those who hold the earth as merely a temporary and subordinate step in the journey of transcendence beyond the confines of this world. Broadly speaking, however, 'the notion that humans are not ultimately at home in the natural world has undeniably shaped Christianity and, through the tradition, influenced Western Culture in general' (Peterson, 2000, p. 239).

The momentum located in such religious direction for burial and death is conjoined here in American funereal rites, concocted out of an emerging ethos of the 'denial of death' and the concomitant practices of what Davies labels the 'cosmetic–concrete–casket complex'. Part of a broader shift into modernity, such burial practices developed out of reformist notions of sanitation, cleanliness, and purity, as well as coinciding with associated needs to prepare the dead for potential resurrection. Many of the analysts of death, dying, and burial chronicle the movement of death and burial from their communal orientation as noted briefly above, to an event that has become secularized, individualized, professionalized, privatized, and medicalized—loosely characterized as moving the body and death out of the hands of the family and social and spiritual community, and into the hands of the 'professionals' (Lofland, 1978; Howarth & Jupp, 1996; Moller, 1996; Hockey *et al.*, 2001). The medical establishment, healthcare providers, funeral directors, and bereavement counsellors have assumed authority for this family–community responsibility: 'The rationalization of death serves to abstract it from knowledge and expertise held within the immediate family and their wider community' (Hockey *et al.*, 2001, p. 193). The distancing or detachment of families and community from the death of a member is coincident with an emergent preoccupation, especially in North America, with the modernistic aesthetic of sanitation and avoidance of decay, which, according to Hockey *et al.*, 'constitutes a denial of deterioration by a nation that regards cleanliness as a key aspect of religious and cultural identity' (Hockey *et al.*, 2001, p. 190). The cosmetic work of morticians to 'bring the deceased back to life' for the purposes of the funeral and casket display are tied to this era of denial, as is 'the corresponding practice of burying the dead in substantial caskets within brick or concrete-lined graves' (Davies, 2005, p. 75). The social and cultural values read from such practices tell us of commodification, detachment, denial of death, and fear of disposal and natural processes of decomposition.

Environmental Ethics and Support for Green Burial

Moufassa, looking out over the 'pridelands', says to his son and heir Simba:

> Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. As king, we need to understand that balance, and respect all the creatures—from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope.
> Simba quizzically: But dad, don't we eat the antelope?
> Moufassa patiently: Yes Simba, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass, and the antelope eat the grass. And so we are all connected in the great circle of life. (Disney Corporation, 1995)

This view of the world (all critiques of Disney aside for the moment) passes on the cycle-of-life story resonant with notions of ecospheric continuity. There are some useful permutations of environmental thought that inform this discussion on green burial, as they are closely aligned with the premises of connection, continuity, and responsibility around which I anchor my death musings and aspirations. This is a necessarily eclectic and somewhat cursory movement through some of this literature, and though the points made are commonly voiced and debated in realms like this journal, I believe that they help to build the case for green-burial ideas, especially as these practices acquire more visibility, more interest, and, probably, more consternation. It is noteworthy that though the subject of human death and the matter of the disposal of the body do not emerge explicitly from out of these realms of ecological thought, the concepts are closely associated with the reconceptualization of which I write here.

Intergenerational Equity

The principle of *intergenerational equity*—a requirement to think and act across generations—has critical relevance for green burial. It is basically an argument about the need for humans to shift our actions and behaviours in ways such that those in the future (and the principle begins with humans as the initial objects in this domain) have access to a similarly functioning biosphere to that experienced by those in the present. Gill's work on memorialization raises concerns about what he calls 'temporal myopia', which he holds to be an increasingly pervasive ethos in contemporary society, a focus on the *here-and-now*. Though he writes largely about the long-term social implications of neglect of *memorialization* in death matters, it is suggestive of future environmental ramifications:

> It is a rather different matter, however, when we come to consider our increasingly shorter time-horizons. I believe that our current lack of interest in the dead is related to our increasing lack of interest in the welfare of children. That is, both reflect a given generation's interest in its own well-being over the course of its own life-span, and *a general lack of interest in the future that will be inherited by one's children*. (Gill, 1996, p. 116, emphasis added)

It seems to follow that, in order for an ethic of intergenerational equity to become more broadly engrained, we need to affix enough value to the preservation of the environment through an expanded range of human moral duties so that we act to safeguard it into the future. Such a kind of valuation, often called *intrinsic value*, is essentially about a need to perceive and posit value out beyond the boundaries of the human community. Hettinger and Throop describe it as follows: 'An ecocentric ethic treats natural systems as intrinsically valuable and/or morally considerable' (Hettinger & Throop, 1999, p. 4). The contention is that narrow anthropocentric considerations disregard the integral connections and ties that we have to the biosphere, our place on this earth, and the duties that necessarily follow from those ties. Hence the almost spiritual fervour accorded Aldo Leopold's maxim that 'a thing

is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold, 1970, p. 262).

The duty advocated is to act responsibly given the values inherent in the community of nature of which we are a part. The green burial idea would benefit directly from such an expanded realm of moral duty as voiced by these ethical arguments. Writers like Plant (1989), Shiva (1989), and Merchant (1980) hold generally that we are not apart, above, or separated from the earth, but are integrally connected and must live in ways that recognize this. The claim regarding the *dualist* quality of the worldview that dominates the modern era—subject/object, man/ woman, values/facts, etc.—permits a form of separation of humanity from the earth that is ultimately destructive. It leads, as Callicott notes, to 'the resulting alienation of the self from the "external world"—*which includes our own bodies*' (Callicott, 1990, p. 114, emphasis added). Wirzba's work provides some interesting notes on the lineage of the contemporary dualistic, scientific ethos of 'objectivity' and superiority of human reason, which is to all intents and purposes underscored by a need to transcend and free ourselves of natural material constraints, the 'demands of place', and our own bodies.

Closely tied to this unease over the dualist and alienated character of prevailing social ethics is Gaian Theory, popularized by Lovelock. He theorizes the planet as an organism functioning in a systemic, biologically cooperative manner, and the world as not just an array of coincident animate and inanimate components. Lovelock's metaphor or teleology of Gaia as planetary *organism* yields some critical ecological thinking around the idea that the renewal of life on earth is inherent in death:

> [T]he entropy of an open system must increase. Since we are all open systems, this means that all of us are doomed to die. Yet it is so often ignored or deliberately forgotten that *the unending death-roll of all creatures, including ourselves, is the essential complement to the unceasing renewal of life*. (Lovelock, 1987, p. 125, emphasis added)

The Gaian metaphor, though problematic, has substantial conceptual utility in thinking about connection, continuity, and responsibility called for in consideration of our bodies, our rituals of burial, and the future.

Bioregionalism

In the concept of *bioregionalism* we find a geo-specific environmental-ethical decree to *root* and attach ourselves to place, and to live through our interconnections. Berthold-Bond (2000) makes some useful ties between this concept and ideas of sense-of-place relevant to the theme of green burial. He sees coalescence around the belief that meaning is located in our biophysical *situatedness*, and that through overt attempts to know and *reinhabit* our place we acquire heightened consciousness of connection, relatedness, and reciprocal responsibility—'integrated with ecosystems' (see Frenkel, 1994). The claim is that experiential knowledge of *our* ecosystem and of our place within it can amend the dysfunction of alienation and cognitive separation from the world—the kinds of Cartesian issues of separation noted earlier.

'The environment is not an inert, physical entity "out there" with trees, water, animals, and the like, but a dynamic system of interconnected, meaning-laden places' (Cheng *et al*., 2003, p. 96). I would contend that emotional bonds with place are deeply associated with identity formation and significant with regard to notions of cultural and ecological connection, and that human social transience from place disengages us from our world and, hence, from responsibility to it. In my own death scenario, I see a consciously motivated need to reconnect with a place that had profound and deep meaning in my life—in effect, a reattachment through my death.

Place and 'Sense of Place'

I want to follow these threads a bit further. Bioregional theory urges us to *live-in-place* so that we are more capable of understanding and living according to the ecological relationships that are part of that place (Berthold-Bond, 2000). The contention is that people and place are interdependent, and when we see this, we function in ways that correspond to that knowledge and feeling. Some might call this a sort of regional consciousness (see Meredith, 2005). Relph's work has been pivotal regarding the development of ideas of *sense-of-place* and they have been instrumental in orienting our sense of self as partly comprising place-attachment—that is, of human–nonhuman connections—*immersed in particular places*. In this vein, it is appropriate to note that Leopold's 'land-ethic' treatise, upon which many later environmental ethics ideas are rooted, can be said to be essentially about an ethic of embeddedness in place, and therefore about our inherent ties to the biotic community of which we are and play a part—embodied and embedded.

  Being 'in place' is a vital element in my own death-story, which arises from rich memories of childhood in northern Ontario. This was a place of magic for me. The deeply felt wonder and pleasure I felt in the midst of a blueberry patch looking out over this pristine world of clean lakes, fragrant mosses, the alive yet brooding forest, and the awe of the journey to 'Lost Lake' and of being naked in its waters deep in the Canadian wilderness have dwelt profoundly within me for almost 50 years. This is not my bioregion anymore technically speaking, and therefore my choice of this site for my death helps explicate the complexities of sense-of-place and connection. As noted, my time in this place as a child was of deep and special connection. It is worth quoting at length here from Relph, who notes the importance of place during youth:

> In particular the places of childhood constitute vital reference points for many individuals. They may be special locations and settings which serve to recall particular personal experiences.... In both our communal and our personal experience of places there is often a close attachment, a familiarity that is part of knowing and being known *here*, in this particular place. It is this attachment that constitutes our roots in places; and the familiarity that this involves is not just a detailed knowledge, but a sense of deep care and concern for that place. (Relph, 1976, p. 37)

Places of deep geographic identification are held to be those places to which one has developed significant attachment—and these attachments can have been formed over

any duration. The key is the impact and significance that has been created around that place. Importantly, writers like Pascual-de-Sans see these special places of attachment as being probable choices for death: 'Finally, there is a place where one dies. Often people think about or try to choose where they would like that place of death to be . . . . It has to do with the life that comes to an end at that time' (Pascual-de-Sans, 2004, p. 352).

A project of re-imagining our place through ecologically sensitive burial practices would include respect and reciprocal actions. The concepts of intergenerational equity and place merge when Luther Standing Bear states that attachment and understanding come only with time, that they are inseparable, and that stable connection across generations arises only with this kind of continuity: 'Man must be born and reborn to belong. Their bones must be formed of the dust of their forefather's bones' (quoted in Booth & Jacobs, 1990, p. 35). The body is the vehicle of the senses, and we as humans experience the world through these. Our experiences come together to create our culture, and we pass these on to the next generation.

Finding meaning and values in such *re*-workings of place and people bonds is inherently about *re*-connection. And, given the social construction of such meanings and values for place, there is potential for developing ties in ways that recognize their ecological and intrinsic values. Environmental psychology holds that cognitive models of such place-building and identity are products of a variety of individual and cultural factors ultimately, ones shaped by our experiences. Hence, significant aspects of self-identity are constructed out of cultural values people bring to bear on their connection to place, as well as their individual associative experiences with place. And, these self-identity constructions are integral to personal understanding, and usually, therefore, strongly maintained and preserved when possible—identity exerts a powerful behavioural influence (Cheng *et al.*, 2003).

From Theory to Practice: Non-anthropocentrism and Environmental Pragmatism

Developing both a conceptual sense of what intrinsic value or intergenerational equity means and how to shift our ethical positions to accommodate them remains a contentious debate in the literature. Some would argue that this attribution of value beyond our human realm and into the future is difficult if not logically impossible. Writers such as Light raise concerns about the difficulties of taking these intangible ethical positions and applying them to the public realm: 'The focus on somewhat abstract concepts of value theory has pushed environmental ethics away from discussion of which arguments morally motivate people to embrace more supportive environmental views' (Light, 2002, p. 427). The debates in the realm of *enlightened self-interest* mirror this kind of caution located between the search for a more comprehensive domain of moral consideration, and on-the-ground practices and objectives necessary to overcome environmental exigencies (see Hayward, 1994). Following this, Light also notes that not all environmental theorists hold that an extended set of moral duties is a requirement if humans are to account adequately for non-human nature. The debates about how to work through the tangle of intrinsic value theory and intergenerational equity, and actually effect change, sometimes call on positions that avoid the debate by

looking for sufficiency of moral consideration in what might be called *non*-instrumental foundations or environmental pragmatism. This gives rise to Light's calls for environmental valuation that is appropriate to particularities and place-contingency.

The question, at this point, seems to be: what sorts of considerations and arguments might be relevant and necessary in order to move the adoption of green burial practices? Do we need an ecocentric ethos that attaches value beyond both the human community and the present, or might we locate sufficient argument and grounds for change in a sympathetic or *enlightened utilitarian rationality*—a sort of ecocentrism-lite? Green burial practices that have just begun to emerge in different parts of the industrialized North definitely contribute to this 'rationality'.

Impacts of Modern Burial Practices

A brief sketch of the kinds of ecological issues that are associated with modern burial practices, especially as they occur in Canada and the US, is useful for acquiring some idea of the pragmatic concerns tied to shifting our attitudes and choices in our death and burial practices. Along with increasing concern over the scarcity of the land resource in general for these kinds of land-uses in and near urban areas (see Chawkins, 2003; Leidig, 2003; Swartz, 2004), studies point to the increasing levels of contaminants associated with modern burial practices and body preparation, in the increasing use of natural resources for coffins and containers, as well as in cemetery maintenance (Chawkins, 2003; see Ashley, 2004; Swartz, 2004). For instance, Spongberg and Becks note:

> Possible contaminants include poisonous chemicals, such as arsenic and mercury, which were used in past embalming and burial practices; formaldehyde from current embalming practices; varnishes, sealers, and preservatives used on wood coffins; and lead, zinc, copper, and steel from metal coffins. (Spongberg & Becks, 2000, p. 313)

Crabbe, in a news article on green burial, cites the findings of the Green Burial Council in the US, which figures that '827,060 gallons of embalming fluid, 1.6 million tons of reinforced concrete, 20 million feet of wood and thousands of tons of metal' are used in conventional burials each year in that country. We also see related concerns about prevailing burial practices in German cemeteries, for instance, which are reporting that bodies buried 40 years ago are showing little decomposition. It is speculated that this is caused by contemporary diets replete with preservatives, and/or the fact that soil bacteria responsible for decomposition are missing due to pollution and pesticides (see Leidig, 2003).

Recycling the Body: Emerging Practice and Constraints

> I don't even want a cardboard box. I want my body to give back to the earth. It is supposed to decompose and nourish the earth, become food for all the mircroorganisms. (Dunn, 2004)

The recent emergence of natural cemeteries in some places in North America, and the media coverage of them, provides some useful context for gaining a sense of the opinions and positions of the people for whom green burial has appeal. California, Texas, South Carolina, and Florida have begun to accept cemeteries oriented to such alternative burials (see Crabbe, 2006), and media commentary has provided some window onto the strength and diversity of environmental rationale voiced by those who either operate and/or have chosen this form of burial ritual for themselves or loved ones.

George Russell, the manager of a green burial ground in Ramsey Creek, South Carolina, says green burial practice is for those who wish to 're-nurture the circle of life, fertilize the soil and provide a perpetual legacy to beauty', adding that 'it doesn't make sense to destroy rain forests by making mahogany coffins, or even worse, turn a person into a toxic pickle' (Chawkins, 2003, p. F12). Similarly, the website for Forever Fernwood, a new green burial cemetery in California, advertises its services as such:

> Forever Fernwood is a leader in the green burial movement in the United States. This natural option provides an environmentally-friendly burial. Without embalming and through the use of biodegradable products, we ensure long-term preservation of land for our community and for future generations. By selecting a natural burial we allow our loved one to return to nature. (Fernwood, 2005)

Such burial practices have a longer-term precedent in England, where more than 180 cemeteries have already been opened under these sorts of criteria (see Dunn, 2004; Davies, 2005). In Britain, they label such an alternative a 'woodland burial'. A spokesperson from the Natural Death Centre in Britain says the concept 'reflects a growing preference for personalized, non-religious funerals, and the idea of being returned to nature when you die' (*The Economist*, 2002).

We can see strong sentiment around the notion of ecological *return* and *connection* voiced by the proprietors and the 'consumers' of these cemeteries. In British Columbia, Canada, Dorothy Yada of the Memorial Society is advocating for green burial because 'rather than being hermetically sealed in isolation or removed through cremation, which is also a high consumer of energy, the remains of the deceased continue to be part of the natural cycle of the planet' (Hilton, 2006, p. 26). Those choosing the alternative of green burial are of a particular demographic (see Dunn, 2004), of which *The Economist* writes: 'The baby-boomers and 1960s flower children are getting to a certain age now, and many are looking for "alternatives" in death just as they may have done in life.' These choices of green burial seem to be based in part on some alternative 'spiritual' quest with an ecological orientation—the cycle of life concept being played out consciously through this choice. Russell, the 'green cemetery' owner noted above, says this about the ecological and spiritual contribution people can make via this burial choice:

> We must live on this planet in peace and we need to try to get along. Everyone wants to feel they've left the world a positive legacy. To know you've saved that

part of creation, that you've left something to future generations, is a
wonderful thing. (Calvert, 2003)

Interestingly, we also see that appeals to Christian scriptures are being allied
with this theme. For example, the Ethician Family Cemetery in Texas advertises its
Green Family Cemetery using Genesis 3:19: 'Till you return to the ground, For out
of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return' (Ethician News
Network, 2003).

Green burial choices also claim to be contributing to land preservation and
stewardship (Ashley, 2004; Fimrite, 2004). That is, choosing these new cemetery
practices can ensure that land is taken out of circulation from other resource-use
allocations of mining, forestry, and suburban development for example. This kind of
environmental sentiment appears to have a more secular pragmatic environmental
orientation. That is, some people opt for an alternative burial in a farmer's hedgerow
or in a forest because they see the act as contributing simply to an ecological cycle
and process, while others see it as a means to protect farmland. For example, Crabbe
writes of a man working to open a natural cemetery on his farm: 'John Wilkerson
wants two wishes followed after his death: that his burial be simple and his family
farm be protected from development' (Crabbe, 2006).

In the same pragmatic environmental vein, others see their choice based in *not*
contributing to further environmental degradation. One alternative-plot purchaser
'disapproves of the huge amounts of water, pesticides and herbicides used to keep
cemetery grounds immaculate. And cremation, he says, wastes energy and pollutes
the air' (Associated Press, 2004). A number of ecological factors are notable in this
alternative burial choice, and they generally are related to concerns and interests
about recycling the body back into natural processes; not contributing to further soil
and water degradation that comes from prevailing body preservation and interment
practices of conventional cemetery maintenance procedures; reducing natural
resource use of wood and other materials (Ashley, 2004; Dunn, 2004); and land
preservation. These sorts of factors may most visibly fall under the rubric of
enlightened self-interest.

However, though it might be said that 'this bucolic funerary rite amounts to
a radical act in the United States' (Ashley, 2004), we also see that there is a range
of other factors at play in the development of these new kinds of cemetery practices.
For example, we also see that issues of farmer exigencies drive adoption of land-
use diversification schemes like that of selling plots of land for green burial needs
(*The Economist*, 2002). In addition, health contamination issues associated with
formaldehyde use—both the soil degradation concern and its cancer-inducing
potential—are a growing concern (Ashley, 2004; Dunn, 2004). Not the least is the
search for cheaper forms of burial, a compelling reason for alternatives to prevailing,
and increasingly costly, cemetery practices (Calvert, 2003; Dunn, 2004; Ambrose,
2005). In keeping with other commodification practices, there is also some level
of niche-marketing and status-consciousness arising with green burial, some
journalists suggest (Ambrose, 2005). The 'materialism' of consumer culture seems
to drive some consumers of green burial, while ironically becoming one of the
signs of conspicuous *non-consumption* (Swartz, 2004). It is also significant to note

that this kind of funereal alternative is being implemented by what the media are labelling 'entrepreneurs'—the US ethos is often more accommodating and less suspicious when there is a profit motive. And so, the commodification of the burial ritual can be inscribed in this movement as it is being played out under the green burial and natural-cemetery examples. It would appear that a pragmatic environmental orientation starts to emerge as a visible and viable descriptor of the green burial movement.

Concluding Thoughts

> A young Cherokee boy being raised by his grandmother is rewarded for his first hunting success by his grandmother's celebratory cooking of the small bird with the corn that she brings from the storehouse near their cabin. She does this each time he brings food home from his juvenile hunting experiences. The boy's growing curiosity about the source of the corn ends with his creeping up and peeking in the little storehouse to find that the corn comes out of his grandmother's body when she rubs her sides. Needless to say, his discovery of her secret compels her to move corn from its magical realm of production, to one that calls on the development of corn agriculture by the Cherokee people. She does this by instructing her grandson to clear a patch of earth, and rub and bury her body on this cleared patch when she dies. From this place, corn then begins to grow—'Now, though she had gone from the earth as she had once been, she would be with the people forever as the corn plant, to feed them'. (Caduto & Bruchac, 1997, p. 141)

My *Demise on the Shores* story has spurred the exploration of ideas examined in this paper. A series of ideas and stories has been brought together that provides both theoretical and pragmatic bases for sorting through my green burial aspirations. Notions of connection, continuity, and responsibility as seen in the Grandmother Corn story represent for me pertinent truths about appropriate values orientation. Ethical positions that expand our sense of moral values from their current human-centred locus—recognition of intrinsic value—and a sense of the critical need to think about future generations—intergenerational equity—are closely aligned with my green burial desires.

It is clear that, in some profound ways, humans are *apart* from nature, as well as integrally a *part* of nature, but ethical positions like those cited here help to decentre humans as the sole possessors and arbiters of value. This dialectic gives us the ability to transcend our earthly bounds in some ways, but also ensures that we hold respect and value for the ties that bind us to our worldly places. Gardiner's arguments, which locate humans both in *nature* and in *culture*, are instructive here, as are Berthold-Bond's ideas regarding concepts of re-situating our moral universe outwards to again include the natural world.

We arrive at a juncture where a variety of environmental and place concepts, an account of modernist burial shifts and religious conceptions inherent to much contemporary burial ritual, especially in North America, and the voices of those to whom green burial has heartfelt appeal, have created a space for reflecting more consciously on the need for alternative and more ecologically sensitive

burial practices. Sound ecosystem function requires our attention to matters of human–nonhuman nature integration. We need to understand humanity's part in the flows of energy and matter that constitute the complex and non-linear systems defining the biosphere, and develop knowledge of our own connection and obligations to maintain the intactness of those systems. These arguments strongly urge the development of an ethic that places the human body in the midst of, and as innately part of, animate and inanimate nature. Such an ethic would be appropriate to and useful for guiding our deliberations about death and burial practices. Wirzba, in his poetics on 'placing the soul' more solidly in its material circumstances, sums up nicely some of this paper's concerns about a modernist ethos of self, death-denial, detachment and transcendence, and our technological hubris. He states:

> Though we might dream of ourselves as disembodied, immortal souls, or as complex computers that will finally shed all biological and physiological limitations, the fact remains that we live necessarily through our bodies. And these bodies, in turn, necessarily live through the bodies of others—wheat, rice, steer, fish, microorganisms, bees, chickens. (Wirzba, 2003, p. 86)

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that we live in the midst of social, cultural, and economic structures that are dominated by human-centred notions of value and moral consideration: 'Even if sound non-anthropocentric motivations can be described ... at best we would expect that any motivation for any action would be mixed, especially when it is a human performing that action' (Light, 2002, p. 441). Examining the emergence of green burial practices and cemeteries devoted to some form of alternative interment with an ecological basis suggests to us that we can expect a mix of factors contributing to the adoption of green burial. Yes, we can discern an important element of the extension of human moral duties out into the environment in the voices of adherents and consumers choosing this kind of burial, and a concomitant interest in 'sense-of-place' and its connection to care for our world. But, we also see that other factors of human health, of conventional burial costs, and even of status and 'positioning' are coincident drivers in this natural cemetery movement. Concerns about soil and water degradation, and wishes to diminish these, as well as land-stewardship aspirations via land set-asides for green cemeteries, fit most visibly into the environmental management and environmental pragmatism space along our ethical spectrum. We are likely to see the growth of this alternative as a viable option, especially if the baby-boomers represent a cohort that embodies more ecologically sensitive aspirations in burial choices—certainly, as Light suggests, if we cater to the seemingly growing ties between care for the future and this form of interment. Green burial would be an appropriate way of commemorating a person's way of living—that is, through their way of dying. Davies, one of the few writers who have written of green burial, notes that such an act suggests of this choice, 'if I give my body back to the earth I am expressing a hope for the future of the planet' (Davies, 2005, p. 80).

We also can take from the account provided here of modernist shifts in death and burial procedures that the detachment, privatization, and professionalization of death have played critical roles in wresting control of this event from the hands of both those who have died and those most closely associated with the deceased. They also have helped to engender, at least in North America, a removal of death from our everyday lives—which invites a sense of fear and denial—and a removal of this deeply meaningful transition process out of the hands of the family and the community. I think it is instructive to see how this rationalization of death is caught up simultaneously in other more deeply held beliefs about transcendence. It requires of those who are committed to greater environmental sensibility to inquire into the impacts of dominant religious beliefs on our understandings of, and responsibility towards, the earth. The 'cosmetic–concrete–casket complex' is partly a construct of this modernist era of sanitation and professionalization—a scientific, detached, and commodity-oriented view of the world, and of the religious doctrine that generally has viewed the earth as a tainted place from which the body/soul is meant to depart at death. The loss or neglect of a sense of responsibility to the earth—God's creation—and to an enduring notion of continuity, raises some critical ethical questions to which green burial represents at least a partial response. Though we see some movement in Christian attitudes and beliefs with the discourses about stewardship and responsibility, Davies poignantly notes: 'Just how Christians will play the card of ecology alongside the card of heaven remains to be seen' (Davies, 2005, p. 78).

In the end, how might we envision the recycling of the body in burial practices that can be appended to the more conventional perceptions of the place of the funeral in commemorating those who have died? That is, how might we engender a concern for ecosystemic needs and our integral ties to the world, along with the myriad of spiritual, personal tribute, and human social needs tied to death and burial practices? Certainly in my own scenario, before I decay into those rocks and feed any crows, I want my green interment event to be a social and festive occasion of family, friends, and community. I want there to be laughing and enjoyment, celebration, and the opportunity to commemorate my life, gain some appreciation for the ecological values embodied in my choice of burial rite, and be with one another. So we need also to entertain how we develop these environmentally sensitive practices in concert with our more human-centred needs around death and burial, especially in the face of some level of dismissal or condemnation that may arise with such practices. Can we envision a broadening of acceptance of *green* forms of burial as we are beginning to see in Britain and the US?

I find comfort in envisioning the development of new practices that celebrate the re-immersion of the body in the *circle of life*, in tandem with the sorts of things we desire in our conventional commemoration of the deceased. Green burial in its early stages is already initiating rituals that satisfy a more comprehensive ethic—one with an environmental orientation. As the more ethereal elements of our deceased loved ones move on to 'meet their maker' in whatever imagined manner we wish that to occur—satisfying our cultural and social needs through the ritual of the burial ceremony—we can also assist the living to be more conscious of their ecological selves, all the while helping to appease deeper fears that the world is continuing without us (Moller, 1996). That is, an expanded view of the place and role of our

bodies as part of a continuum on earth would also, along with the spiritual constructs we as humans have developed, contribute to lessening some of the anxiety of our deaths. We can do this by seeing our immortality immanent in the cycle of life—reconstituted through other life forms. With a little poetic license, I draw from Snyder who holds that 'Our place is part of what we are', and invert it to include that 'through our re-immersion we become part of that place' and of the continuity of life on earth that this represents (in Berthold-Bond, 2000).

> I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars. (Whitman, 1955, p. 72)

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Notes

[1] Note that the process of getting to this remote location is hazy in some respects—ensuring that friends and family get my close-to-death body to this sacred place on time, though not so soon that I find myself twiddling my thumbs and waiting impatiently for my death to occur. I jest here, as my *story* has raised much collegial humour.

[2] The terms 'decay' and 'rot' do not generally connote pleasant or comforting images in their common usage—certainly not when applied to our conceptions of the body after death and its placement in the earth. Such visual speculations on decay and rot are more the fodder for the genre of the horror film, where they are meant precisely to horrify, not appease or comfort us regarding the continuity of the cycle of life after death.

[3] My own death scenario on the surface has some resemblance to the Zoroastrian 'sky burial', one whose tradition, held by the Parsis, was to have vultures pick the bones clean of the 'contaminated' flesh. The bones could then be properly disposed of in water, fire, or earth (see Kastenbaum, 2004).

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