



# Funeral Home OR Home Funeral?

BY VIRGINIA ROSE

In the swirling waters of living wills and advanced directives, it's easy to become immersed in the flotsam and jetsam of life with no regard for the ultimate rite of passage, much less what lies beyond. Perhaps it's that the hand of climate disruption is tickling

our awareness of earth's demise that a kinder, gentler way of dying is making a comeback: the green burial.

Of course, green burials are nothing new—Native American burial mounds, for example.

While cremation is the fastest-growing choice for one's final disposition, green burials are quickly becoming recognized as an environmentally safe way to return "dust to dust." Locally, Natural Path Sanctuary is leading the way.

On 25 acres of rural land near Verona, the Sanctuary was established by the Farley Center in June 2011 as a nature preserve burial ground/cemetery with an educational component focused on promoting sustainable end-of-life care choices and burial practices. It's the first green cemetery in Dane County and one of only a few in the country. Directed by Shedd Farley, son of Gene and Linda Farley, whose bodies are buried there, the Sanctuary continues their legacy of ecological sustainability. Uprooting himself from his life as a homebuilder in Denver for 38 years, Shedd has taken over running the Farley Center. More often than not, he can be found digging three-foot graves, the desired depth for earth to do its work.

There are currently around 100 gravesites in the Sanctuary. Finding them can be difficult as above ground markers are limited in size and materials used. The Sanctuary partners with area funeral homes to prepare the body, although families may choose to do so themselves. All burial shrouds and containers are required to be biodegradable, and, of course, embalming and vaults are not allowed. The burial sites are essentially camouflaged by the abundance of nature, leaving the land as undisturbed as possible while the birth/death cycle is endlessly recreated.

One cannot talk about Natural Path Sanctuary without mention of Gene and Linda, long-time family physicians who dedicated their lives to healing the world of social and economic injustice. They practiced medicine on the Navajo Reservation in rural upstate New York and in the inner cities of Rochester, NY; Denver, CO; and Kingston, Jamaica, and were

tireless advocates for universal healthcare coverage.

Believing in the importance of locally grown agriculture, the Farleys made the land accessible to those who had little resources to purchase land. Currently, a diverse group of community-supported agriculture businesses grow produce on land adjacent to the Sanctuary, paying rent with use of equipment. Shedd also has partnered with the Department of Corrections via the Grow Academy, which provides teenagers with a labor experience as a form of community service.

Contemplating our demise might be viewed as a meditation on the poetics of life and death. As life offers us more complex choices, we may decide that less is more and that there's a simpler, environmentally friendly way of returning to our roots as conscious stewards of our planet.

*Photographs provided by Natural Path Sanctuary.*

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