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Dust to dust

By Amy Goldman Koss

I don't relish joining my cremated in-laws on our bookcase. Luckily, there are alternatives.



Michael KirkhamFor The Times

I recently saw an article about saving money on funeral costs, but the thing that grabbed me was the picture: It was of a wicker coffin! The basket-casket in the photo was lovely; sturdy but airy and decorated with a few flowers.

“Hey!” I thought. “I wouldn’t mind being buried in that! And POOF! A huge chunk of my fear of death was gone!

Until then, I hadn’t realized how much of my death-dread had to do with its accessories. My sister-in-law is a basket lover, so I quickly emailed her: “Saw pretty basket-casket and thought of you!” After hitting “Send,” I realized that might not sound quite right. But I felt so liberated I wanted to share the good news.

My parents made their own funeral plans, so they were the ones who chose the serious wood boxes they were buried in. For myself, I don't see the appeal of spending eternity in a dresser drawer. Coffins have always seemed like a creepy place to await the worms.

But I also don't relish joining my cremated in-laws on our bookcase. Scattering ashes feels akin to littering. Mausoleums look claustrophobic. And eternity in an urn reminds me of "I Dream of Jeannie." I always pitied her.

Another problem I have with death is the process. I die, the authorities are notified, my body is removed from the home/hospital and taken to a funeral home, where I'm wheeled into a refrigerator to await embalming. Bored or disgruntled funeral home employees might take selfies with my corpse. My beloveds don't see me again until my viewing or funeral, by which point I've been embalmed, had my orifices sealed, and had my hair and makeup done by someone who never saw me alive and has no idea how I styled myself. After the service, I'm sealed in a reportedly leak-proof coffin and lowered into a concrete-lined grave designed to keep the grass even for the mowers.

Luckily, there are other options. Death-positive folks are busily working to make green burials and natural burials less suspect and more easily accessible. There are already more eco-friendly burial options than ever before.

At a green burial, our families can be as involved as they wish. They can keep us at home on dry ice, conduct their choice of rituals and forgo the chemicals. When no one's looking, our grandchildren can dress us up and take funny selfies with our corpses. Our grave sites can be out in nature, our basket-caskets lowered directly into the dirt, and the site marked with a tree or stone, practically like cowboy graves on 1970s TV shows. A [bill pending](#) in the California Legislature would make it legal to [compost bodies](#).

At the other extreme, there are also new high-tech options, like having our ashes compressed into gems, 3-D printed into keepsakes or launched into space. Space dust to space dust.

Personally, though, I think death will have enough novelty without requiring a space launch. Plus, I don't want resentment of my death costs to factor into how I'm mourned. The price of disposing of a dead body even in the plainest vanilla way is astronomical enough.

As a newish gardener, I spend a good bit of time poking around in my compost bin. Decomposition has its charms, but while fascinating in its own right, part of my morbid curiosity is self-interest: checking out my future digs. Getting pre-acclimated.

Who knows why we old biddies turn to the garden, but for many of us, with friends and relatives decomposing in distant cemeteries, dirt becomes hard to ignore. What comes next for us may not be "fun" as we know it, but it's certainly interesting to watch. Plus, raising our tiny fists against decay is as futile as taking on earthquakes and volcanoes. Our attempts to thwart it with embalming chemicals and grave liners seem silly, not to mention wasteful.

Maybe it's just me, I but I don't want more time than necessary lying intact, in the dark, cold underground, keeping the worms at bay by emitting noxious fumes that some stranger pumped into my corpse.

Since the wiggles, the roll-ups, the many-legged and the microbes are going to get my body eventually, why not hand it over as soon as I'm done with it?

I don't particularly like the image of being heaved, willy-nilly, naked and open-mouthed into a pit in front of my mourners. Being wound up like a burrito in a shroud sounds cumbersome for my carriers, with the added possibility of unpleasant seepage. But a pretty, naturally biodegradable basket would allow modesty for me and my human survivors — as well as easy but discreet access to my leftovers for my underground decomposers. Perfect!

Plus, my pallbearers won't come away thinking, "Gee, Amy was even heavier than she looked!"

Now if I happen upon a death accessory that whisks away my remaining discomfort over the precise length and breadth of eternity, I'll be all set!

Amy Goldman Koss is a contributing writer to *Opinion* and the author of numerous books for children and young adults. www.amygoldmankoss.net