



## FDChat #05 – Green Burial with Joe Sehee

**Nancy Burban:** Hi, I'm Nancy Burban, your host for Funeral Directors Chat, a podcast providing funeral professionals with insight to current industry topics, news, and trends. Today we will be discussing green burials and the outlook that it has on funeral services. Going green is usually associated with hybrid cars, solar panels, but what about environmentally friendly burials, or green burials? Instead of a traditional funeral, where the deceased rests for an eternity in a casket, many people are choosing to be buried in a natural way, in a biodegradable basket or wood casket. Today I have the honor of speaking to Joe Sehee. He is a leading advocate of the green burial movement in the United States, and he is the executive director of the Green Burial Council, an organization that he founded to encourage sustainability in the death care industry.

And to use the burial process as the means of facilitating ecological restoration and landscape level conservation. Joe is also a former Jesuit-Lay minister and a Peabody award winning journalist who has worked in the funeral industry since 1999. And he's a senior fellow with the Environmental Leadership Program and an enviropreneur fellow with the Property Environment Research Center.

His organization recently established the nation's first certifiable standards for cemeteries, funeral providers, and cremation facilities. They're in the majority of states right now offering Green Burial Council approved burial packages.

With that, I'll introduce Joe Sehee and let him explain what green burial is all about.

**Joe Sehee:** Well, green burial is really a way of caring for the dead that furthers legitimate environmental aims, such as the reduction of carbon emissions, the conservation of energy and natural resources, the protection of worker health, and the restoration or preservation of habitat in a practical sense. This means burial without the need for metal caskets, concrete vaults, or embalming with toxic chemicals. And it's really the antithesis to the kind of death care we've been offering in this country over the past century that has often been about impeding the process of decay and regeneration. Green burial really calls for embracing that natural process.

**Nancy:** And how long have you been involved in the green burial movement?

**Joe:** I've been involved in the movement since 2002. And the council was really formed in 2005. And it was formed as a tax exempt non-profit organization, as I mentioned, to protect these environmental benefits that green burial can further. And really to prevent the concept from getting green-washed down the drain. I was involved early on with one of the first green burial projects in the US, and quickly realized that this concept was not going to work unless it had support, not only of the general public, but of the environmental conservation community and the funeral service industry.

So the GBC was created to make sure that these often disparate entities could have a way of coming together to make burial better serve people and the planet.

**Nancy:** Well, this is kind of going back to the beginning, because prior to the Civil War, most people laid people out at home and they did have green burials. Is that right?

**Joe:** That is right. And in fact, 95 percent of the rest of the world essentially is doing the burials we're talking about. I think arterial based embalming, as it's been defined here, really is done in about six or seven countries predominately.

**Nancy:** And the United States kind of leads that movement, doesn't it?

**Joe:** We do. And I think we've had a big focus on sanitation. And, you know, we've taught ourselves that this was the proper way to care for a decedent. And it is one way, and I just want to be clear, the council has been very careful not to take even formaldehyde based embalming off the table. We certainly don't have a problem with people using burial vaults or metal caskets or anything else they want to do to honor the dead, heal the living, and invite in the divine. We just want there to be an option for people who want to live and now die with a lighter hand on the land.

**Nancy:** I understand. And no, it's great to go back to the earth and it's also giving a gift back to the place that you came from.

**Joe:** That's right. And it provides a great deal of solace and intrinsic benefits. I spoke last week with a physician who at 48 discovered he had terminal cancer, and he's been planning his own funeral for the past number of months. And it sounds odd to say that he was excited about it, but he said that himself and it sort of surprised him. He wants part of his legacy to be this gift back to the community that this option exists. And really, what's happened is green burials provided a way for him to focus not on this tragedy really at hand, but on a way for him to give something

back. And it provides a great deal of intrinsic benefits that I don't think conventional death care does very often.

**Nancy:** Joe, what are the council's areas of focus and philosophy?

**Joe:** The GBC is really interested in a couple of areas. We've done a lot of advocacy to really re-educate consumers that they have a number of rights that they didn't know they had when it came to end of life rituals. Many Americans, most I would say, don't really understand, for example, that they can have a funeral without embalming. I lost my mom last year and she was convinced of that fact. And her only alternative was the direct cremation without a funeral in her mind. So we're trying to let people know that in fact there is a way to have a green burial and a funeral. And that there are ways to do something positive with one's last act. We've also been involved educating both the funeral service industry and the conservation community.

I've probably spoken to more than half of the states' cemetery and funeral associations. And we're going to continue to do more educating to prepare this industry to better serve families who want more eco-friendly end of life rituals. We've also got into facilitating public private partnerships, bringing together land trusts and park service agencies with the funeral service industry.

We have one that we're launching in Texas with the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife that will be marketed through funeral homes and cremation companies to make available scattering in public parks. That helps generate money to protect natural areas that are at risk of development. And our big focus has been on standard setting. And what it's really evolving into is more of an eco-rating system.

But what we've done is to set forth standards so that consumers can distinguish one shade of green from another when it comes to a cemetery or a funeral home or a product manufacturer. And we've done that with, I think, a great deal of success. Our philosophy really is to bring about a new ethic in the field of funeral service that is rooted in transparency, accountability, and ecological responsibility.

And I think any entity getting involved with green is going to have to do this. We also want to make sure that green burial does not diminish conventional offerings, and it doesn't have to. And we think that people should be able to do whatever they deem appropriate when it comes to a funeral. And I think that message is getting out slowly but surely.

We want this option to be an option within funeral service, rather than an alternative. And we also want to create an open source network so that cemeterians and funeral directors can learn from one another and help us evolve this idea in a responsible manner so that it does the most amount of public good. And finally, we really want to bring about a new model of leadership to a highly fragmented field.

I used to be involved with social advocacy and got to spend some time with the Jesuit liberation theologians who taught me that often times we assimilate our fields, rather than transcending them. And I think that we're trying to allow anyone to participate and plug into this story that we're trying to set forth. And we're trying to do it in as positive a manner as we can.

**Nancy:** And that's one of the reasons we wanted you on this podcast, because a lot of funeral directors see this as the antithesis of the funeral services industry. They don't see it as a way that they can actually see any re-numeration for their services, or they see it as the opposite of what they are doing right now. I have a very different opinion, and I am sure that you do too.

**Joe:** Well, it is just the same way the funeral industry approached cremation several decades ago. They thought that they could go against what the market was asking for, and it is a favorite expression of mine that "The fates lead the willing, and drag the unwilling." Well, the market tends to do the same thing, and that didn't work out so well. In fact, the United States is the only country on the planet where cremation is regarded as an alternative to a funeral. Go up to Canada, and people literally have a funeral, and come out of it, and go one way to the crematory and one way to the cemetery. That is not done here, and I have been trying to preach that we can't make that mistake again, and I don't think we will.

Many funeral directors I think are threatened by this idea, because they don't understand the underlying economics. People in this industry are going to make far more money on a green funeral, then they will on a direct cremation.

The families that want green burial, probably aren't going to spend the same amount of money they would on a high-end funeral. That was never their choice to begin with, and we need to understand that.

The other thing funeral directors and cemeterians need to understand, and the auto industry most recently I think has come to grips with this, is that a concept like this is only a threat if it is not embraced. The "Big 3" didn't want to make fuel efficient cars, because they were seemingly appealing to fringe markets with very low margins, but those companies that were producing them gobbled up market share.

Look what has happened with cremation for example, and look how disruptive a force it has been within this industry, because it was not embraced. I don't want to see that happen with green burial.

**Nancy:** No. You are absolutely right. A person who is going to buy a Cadillac, is going to buy a Cadillac. They are not going to buy a hybrid car.

**Joe:** They are not. I had a company say to me the other day, "We make \$3,000 on our cremation, and \$12,500 on a conventional funeral. How is this green burial going to make up that \$8,500?" I said, "It is not, but that person spending the money for a green burial, they were never going to pay \$12,500 for that funeral," and that is what needs to be understood. Again, the car companies did the same thing, and it was futile. They eventually had to say, "I guess people don't want gas guzzlers, and we're going to have to find a way of making money on more fuel efficient, less expensive vehicles, or someone else will." And that is the same message that this industry needs to understand. Either funeral homes and cemeteries will provide green offerings, or consumers will go out to find out other entities that will.

What is interesting is that a person can step into an auto dealership today, and they can buy a hybrid and they can buy a SUV, and they don't have an issue with that. So, funeral homes in particular, should realize that they can have a range of offerings, and the fact that they have

green offerings isn't going to pull people away from that other conventional funeral that some families may want, but I don't think that is very carefully understood.

I think there is a perception by some folks who don't understand this idea, that somehow it is going to draw people away from wanting a burial bought or from wanting embalming. The lid is already being lifted. Let's be honest about that. Look at cremation rates. I mean, when we really understand what is driving demand for cremation, I think there are a lot of people who are not seeing value in conventional funeral service, and they are not willing to pay money for it.

It is not a cost factor, because it doesn't jive with the fact that people who cremate tend to be more affluent with those who do not, and the same is true with green burial. We are working hard to make sure that green burial does not become equated with cheap burial.

People don't walk into a Whole Foods expecting a discount on their food bill. They are shopping because they want to reduce the amount of pesticides that they consume, or they want to encourage fair trade policies from the suppliers they buy from. There are different things at play, and I think this industry is going to catch on to that.

**Nancy:** No. You are absolutely right. I mean, I shop at whole foods, and I like to call it "whole paycheck." I find value in paying more for a product that is not filled with pesticides. I find value in buying organic food that is better for me than what I can get in a traditional supermarket, and I think a lot of people, especially in California and the West Coast, are really embracing this. Look at Japan, 99.8% of people are not buried. They don't have traditional burials, and in Australia, New Zealand. I mean, cremation is 99% of their burial rites.

**Joe:** You raise a good point. When it comes to cemeteries for example, stewardship costs money, doing ecological restoration costs money, and people will pay a premium for that. Products that we have discovered, caskets and urns, that use eco-friendly materials, oftentimes those materials will cost more. There is more drying time. There is more labor, because there is more clamping. Adhesives that are non-toxic and biodegradable cost more to source, but families don't mind paying for it. In fact, they are willing to do that. All they want to know is that whatever environmental aims that are being purported are legitimate, that is the onus on us right now. If we do that properly, we are going to bring back people to the field of funeral service. If we don't, especially given a lot of the feelings that many have toward this industry, I think we are going to lose out on a big opportunity.

I found out, again when I lost my mother last year, we had to make a decision on buying an urn. I picked out something that I thought was really appropriate, and simple and elegant, and to my sister it wasn't going to cut mustard with the Italian relatives, because it didn't look substantial enough. So, we compromised on something that looked more like marble, but it was Himalayan salt, and it was biodegradable and non-toxic and renewable.

Those are the kinds of compromises that we are seeing families have to make. People are looking at price, aesthetics, and these environmental benefits, and there is discussions around this. I think the mistake that we don't want to make is determining a good, better, and best approach. I think it is a real mistake for us to say that there is one right way to do this.

I coin the term I think in this industry, "Shades of green that has been badly bastardized, " and what I mean by it is that families are going to make decisions about things based on whether or not for example, a product is made domestically or overseas, that may mean something. Do you want timber or products that are harvested substantially? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe labor is an issue. Maybe toxicity is an issue.

What we're hoping to do is be a repository of information, let that family make the decision, and it takes the pressure off of this industry. But we just have to be able to back up those promises somehow, and that is what we are really trying to do.

**Nancy:** What type of green burials are available? Like if you were to tell a family, if a family asks you, "What exactly is a green burial? Is it only going back to the land? Is it going back to the land in the cemetery?" I know that a lot of cemeteries have GPS Systems and all, because I know families are concerned like, "How will I know where my loved one is interred?"

**Joe:** Well, we think that anything you can do with conventional funeral service should be able to be done in a more green manner, including embalming. We think that if you want a monument, that is more of a aesthetic issue rather than an ecological one, there is certainly a way to do that. There are more eco-friendly ways to do inventory control on part of the cemetery operator, but there is really nothing that is taken off the table. I think that we are going to see a lot of interesting things done in the area of memorialization. A couple of years ago, the green cemeteries were doing density at about 100-200 bodies per acre. Now, many of them are at 500-700, 800, and it can be done, because the science behind this is evolving. I think it is a mistake to think that this takes anything away from the family's options. If anything, it just gives them more choices.

**Nancy:** Joe, why do we need a trust provider in this field?

**Joe:** Well, we live in a world where anyone can define green any way they want. And especially with the Internet, you know, it drives me crazy. Anyone can have a .org next to their domain. And what we're discovering is that these organizations, and this is even in the green burial field, are not incorporated. They're not really non-profits. They're often times set up by companies or people who are aspiring to do something in the field. So we need to have people who are credible in this area to connect with the public.

It's going to be increasingly important. And the government is not willing to take on this role. And I think what we're starting to see is that in particular fields where there was green-washing. Carbon trading programs, for example, were all the rage several years ago, until it was discovered that many of them were less than reputable. Some were down right bogus.

And what happened was the consumer said, we're going to back away until we can know who is real and who is not. And they turn to entities that they trusted. Maybe it was the Sierra Club or the Nature Conservancy to tell them where they should go. And now they're much more careful. And that's why we are set up as a trust provider. And again, and I hate to say this, but I think a lot of the public has misgivings about funeral service.

We discovered, for example, that the conservation community had many misgivings because of all the scandals that they're reading about. Well, they wanted to have a way of engaging the

funeral service industry. And it was our responsibility to show that there were decent people out there willing to embrace a new ethic and willing to serve families.

And I think we've made big strides over the last five years. And that's why you see land trust and park service agencies willing to step up and get involved with funeral homes and cemeteries. But I think in general the green economy is going to require that every industry or sector have its own trust provider, or trust providers, to allow consumers to feel good about these purchases.

**Nancy:** What do you think about the government? Do you think the government will get involved in green burial at any point?

**Joe:** Only if we don't do a good job policing ourselves, and I think that's always the case. Once there's some scandals out there and people are effected. I'm working with a funeral association and estate that's trying to help put forth legislation to define green cemeteries. Because there is a guy in this state who got ordained online and then got an exemption from the cemetery bureau started taking money to sell burial plots and had his property foreclosed on and left town.

And we had to work with his partner to refund money and to prevent a real scandal. Thankfully no one was buried, but these are the kinds of things that can happen if there's no oversight and no one is looking under the hood to say, what's going on, fellas? Is there really a legally enforceable mechanism that runs with the land? Is there a deed restriction or a conservation easement?

Or how are you requiring that future operators enforce these promises that are being made today? You know? And how do we know that these protocols are going to result in the outcome that you're promising? It's a much bigger issue, by the way, at the cemetery level than it is with funeral homes or product manufacturers.

**Nancy:** Right, right. I just brought that up because a lot of cemeterians will be listening to this podcast as well. And I just wanted to get your viewpoint on how that might effect them.

**Joe:** Well, I think we're, again, doing a big service. And it's tough work and it's expensive work. And it's challenging work for primarily a volunteer organization. But we're allowing them to be able to credibly reach out to these more eco-conscious consumers. But eco-conscious consumers are demanding oversight and transparency and accountability. It's imperative. And again, this isn't understood I think by our culture, but that's really where things are going.

**Nancy:** Now, what big lessons have you learned, Joe, being in this movement as long as you have?

**Joe:** Well, I think I've learned, again, that ritual requires very light hands. We've seen people be able to participate much more in the funeral burial process and get much more out of it. I hear from funeral directors and cemeterians all the time about this. And we don't want to step on this. I always say that, you know, ritual can't be dictated or codified or served up on any kind of a platter, even a non-toxic biodegradable one, if it's to really work. And so I think that we need to allow families to come into this on their own and to really give them the space that they need. And we're seeing that.

I think providers really need to do this the right way with the right ethic or not do it at all. And I, four, three years ago even, was out there trying to get people in our network. And now, you know, we're being a lot more careful. And we're trying to tell people, don't get pushed out of your comfort zone.

Look, there are ways of doing sanitation, preservation, and restoration that do not have to involve the use of toxic chemicals and it's done all over the world. But if you're not ready, don't offer that, don't worry about it. We're here for you when you want to do it. So we don't want to force people to make this offering.

And some people do feel forced and that's not good. Green washing also has to be avoided at all costs, because the backlash is very difficult to recover from. People need to be very careful about the products they purchase and what promises are being made, as well as the practices that they're purporting to the public.

There's been already a couple of cases of cemeteries and funeral homes and product manufacturers whose promises have been questioned. And some of them have not recovered. I think it's also important for people in this field to understand that good will is an incredibly important form of capital. The council has a lot of it to loan out, but we have a very strict lending policy so that this currency will always mean something.

And I guess the big lesson that people are already starting to learn is that it is possible to do well by doing good and do good by doing well. This can further not only an ecological agenda, but it can make sense economically and it needs to. And that's a very big lesson that I think has been something that more and more people are learning in the funeral service industry.

**Nancy:** That's well said. And I speak to a lot of young people entering the profession and they are concerned about using formaldehyde, which is a known carcinogen. And they are seeking employment in funeral homes that have green embalming practices. And a lot of human resources on some of the bigger chain owned funeral homes are looking into how do we protect our workers? How do we protect people that we employ against known carcinogens that we're using in the workplace, which is the funeral home?

**Joe:** I just talked to a funeral director the other day who does all of his own embalming. And he said to me, and I said, well, that's kind of unusual for the owner to do that, more of its outsource. He said, I don't want to be sued 20 or 30 years from now. That was his big concern, which I thought was interesting. But I said to him, but why do you want to expose yourself to a known carcinogen? I mean, you can't sue yourself, but you don't need to damage yourself either. Look, this is where the world's going and I find it interesting that so many people in the funeral service industry are very defensive about using toxic chemicals.

And I understand it because they've been trained, in mortuary schools I think have led people in this field to believe that this is the only way to facilitate sanitation, restoration, preservation. It's not and we're having to do a big retraining. And I think liability is going to probably move us away from this more than anything.

**Nancy:** You're right. And there's a big move in the funeral services industry, too. Funeral services became monetized after the civil war when men realized that they could make a living,

they could actually make a very good living out of the funeral services practices. And now it's come full circle because a lot of people graduating from mortuary school are not inheriting funeral homes from the parents and the grandparents. They're actually making a conscious decision to go into this industry and to actually help people in their time of need. And to provide a warm, caring environment for them at the last stage of their life. A lot of people going into hospice care and mortuary sciences for this very reason.

They're not inheriting it anymore. And these are the people that are looking for safe practices. They're looking to protect themselves against, like you said, the carcinogens and they would just as soon encourage green burial as a traditional burial, if that's what the families would like. And a lot of the families don't even realize they have an option.

**Joe:** That's a shame. And you're absolutely right. Too many Americans don't have enough awareness about their options. And you know what? It's not serving the industry. Because people are staying away from funerals, because they don't like embalming. And here, I personally think that that word has to be redefined, because it's losing its meaning. Let's talk about sanitation, and preservation, and restoration. No one's opposed to that. There are ways of doing it.

In fact, in Europe, embalming is done, often topically, or with cavity fluid, where there is not arterial fluid used. And some families may be OK with that. There are aspects of the embalming process that some people find invasive and offensive. And others that are acceptable.

So, I think what we need to do is tell families, we're here to serve you, what do you want, we have a range of options when it comes to handling a loved one. And it's going to require a new conversation that I don't think we've ever before had to lead.

**Nancy:** No, you're right. In fact, I have a friend in Australia, who's a funeral director, and there's a product there, that they have, that actually refrigerates the body, and they claim that it's actually as effective, or more, than embalming. Of course, most of the people in Australia are cremated, but those that don't, that want a natural funeral, they use a refrigeration method. Have you ever heard of this?

**Joe:** Yes. You have cooling boards used in many parts of Europe, where embalming, by the way, is illegal. You have the use of dry ice, that's very prevalent, very inexpensive. Most funeral homes in this country don't really have refrigeration, and are going to need to do other things, if they're going to participate. But of course, there are nontoxic and regularly biodegradable postmortem products, and a lot of families don't mind that. They just don't like the idea of a toxic chemical replacing a natural one.

And again, this is an area where perception may be bigger than reality. Quite frankly, formaldehyde, I think there are issues in the prep room that can be mitigated with proper ventilation. I don't think formaldehyde does much damage, if any, in the ecosystem. There's no evidence of that. But if a family doesn't want it, and it's keeping people from having a funeral, let's give them an alternative. And that's what we're hearing.

The only alternative for families has been to have a direct cremation, without a viewing, and without a funeral. And that's wrong.

**Nancy:** It is wrong, and from a psychological point of view, it's very damaging, because people do need to grieve. And if they don't grieve now, they're going to grieve later, and possibly at an inappropriate time. It needs to be done. I'd interviewed some funeral celebrants, and one of them had a ceremony was a green burial ceremony, in California, which, of course, embraces the concept. It was a Buddhist ceremony. They had the bells, and they actually planted a tree, where the woman was buried. And she was in a straw casket. wrapped with a burial shroud, an organic burial shroud, and people formed in a circle, and they rang the little bells, the Buddhist bells.

It was so beautiful, and then the funeral celebrant actually took about 40 minutes, and told the story of the woman's life. And they said that was the most meaningful ceremony that most of the people had attended in quite some time.

**Joe:** I hear the same thing, all the time. And it can be something simple, as allowing the family to fill in the grave, or put some dirt upon the grave, to feel that they're owning that ritual. That's what good ritual requires. And again, this isn't just the funeral director, I think clergy have dominated ritual for far too long. I remember getting married, and inviting a Jesuit priest to officiate our service, and did so in a way that didn't really reflect where my wife and I were coming from. I've led services for other couples, and I'm very sensitive to that.

But I think this is something that we just don't do naturally. It takes light hands, and it takes allowing people to have the space to do what they feel is right to honor the dead, help heal the living, and invite in the divine.

It can't be prescribed. And we, I think, are starting to see in this culture that is breaking down. Look at the way babies started to come into the world, 20, 30 years ago, when couples said, you know, I don't care if this is a little bit more painful, perhaps. Or even clunky, or even risky. We want this process to authentically represent what we're about. We want to be present, and we want to own it.

Look at weddings that you may have attended over the last decade, that took place outdoors, rather than a church or temple. Look at how many were officiated by alternative officiants. Like celebrants, rather than professional religious.

I think you're going to start to see the same thing, when it comes to funerals. And you're going to see a big reclamation, especially because baby boomers are going to be taking the lead. All bets are off, really, as to how this is going to unfold.

**Nancy:** Baby Boomers are very big into the personalization movement, as well. If they can be interred into the earth in a natural setting, it honors them, and it honors the people they love, and it honors the earth. And if they can plant a tree, or do something of that nature, on the site where they're buried. It's a lasting lega-ment. It's a testament to who they are in life, and what their belief systems are.

**Joe:** It is. And as I said, it provides a great deal of solace. I think it allows us to sort of befriend death, on some level. The way we've been doing death care in this country for the past century has really been about impeding the process of decay, and regeneration. Green burial says, let's embrace it. Let's befriend it. We don't need to stave it off. And we don't think that it's less than decent, we think that this is what this is what we are meant to do. You know, ashes to ashes, dust

to dust. That wasn't created out of whole cloth. This, I think, is inherently ingrained in our belief systems, and really in how we interact with our natural world. We've had this little blip, over the last century, and I think we're going to start to see this rapidly change. And we need to be prepared for that change.

**Nancy:** Joe, do you think this green burial movement is moving toward celebrating death, just as we celebrate life, or weddings, or any other ritual that we celebrate?

**Joe:** I think it is, and I think it's allowing us to see a connection between life and death that has been missing a bit. There's a John Muir quote that I love, he actually, I think, was inspired by seeing a early, rural cemetery, and he said, "Let the children walk in nature, and they'll see the beautiful blendings and communions between death and life, and they'll see that death is as beautiful as life, and sting-less, indeed." I think when we see death and life hand in hand, we are able to make peace with that fact, and get in sync with that natural process, and when it's disrupted, it causes some alienation, and it doesn't allow us, I think, to find closure exactly, oftentimes. Green burial is just putting it all out there, and letting people see that this is what goes on in every aspect of life. We want to make peace with that fact, and embrace that fact.

I'm hearing from so many people, who are so much younger. I can't tell you how many people in their thirties and forties have contacted the council. They're not looking to buy a burial plot, and they're not looking to purchase a green casket. They're looking, as they tell me, to wrap their mind around all this.

Earlier in life, they're looking, I think, to befriend death, and to understand their place in the world. And they want to sort of sort through these issues. I think it's wonderful. Again, it provides a context for people to think and talk about death and death care.

**Nancy:** And what a wonderful gift to give children. I know we probably grew up around the same time. And you view death and burials as sad; everybody's crying, and it's a horrible disruption of your life. What a beautiful gift to give children, to show that, no, death isn't scary. Death is a natural process, and it's going to happen to all of us; let's celebrate the life of the person that we're interring at this time.

**Joe:** I agree, and I have a six-year-old who's very comfortable with death, and has seen it up close, and heard about it. And I've also discovered, from many of our friends, that this is the last taboo in our culture. They have a much easier time talking about sex with their kids, than they do death, and we are often hush-hushed away. But look, we need to bring this out in the open. We need to shine a light upon it. I think the funeral service industry, which I think needs to get de-industrialized a bit, needs to claim this territory. I think this is incredibly honorable work. I have seen it. It is some of the most honorable work that can be done, when it is done well.

Unfortunately, we have people in the field who regard it as nothing but a business, and don't really care about that aspect. We haven't been really able to separate in the minds of the public, the folks that who are out there, to really serve families openly and willingly, from those who maybe are just out there to make a buck.

I think the green burial movement is helping to show that there is different kinds of folks in the field, and there is a way to distinguish some of these folks from others. I think that for far too

long, we have propped up this notion that you can get whatever you want from any funeral home or any cemetery. Well, that is just not the case, and there is nothing wrong with saying that.

I think the more that we get out to consumers, that there are ways to distinguish, and if you care for example, about eco consciousness, don't think that you can have a green burial by walking in any door, because you are not going to be necessarily happy.

I think people are starting to plan more carefully, and they are starting to ask more questions. I think that is good. I think a more informed consumer base, ultimately is going to be good for the funeral service industry.

**Nancy:** Yeah. I agree. Also, I get a lot of questions from funeral directors about branding, they want to brand a funeral home. As you know, a lot of the independents have gone out of business over the past 5-10 years, and they are looking to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, "What can we do differently? How can we show people that we care?" I think one way of distinguishing themselves is to say, "We offer green burial services," because as you just pointed out, there is a huge number of people that are looking for these services. What better way to say that, "We offer different services, traditional, cremation, and green burials services?"

**Joe:** That's right, and that we've been doing it far before the market emerged. I think that people who do this now are going to take advantage of that leadership position for many, many years. Ten years from now, everyone is going to be offering green options, I promise you that. But I think the public will look differently upon the people who jump on the bandwagon later on, and we've seen that in other fields. Here, it is an opportunity to say, "We do it, because we think it is the right reason," and especially for a funeral home. There is no reason to do this--to not do this now. It is so easy to be able to make these offerings, without having business disrupted.

Now, cemeteries are taking a bigger chance, because if they are to create a green section, they need to know that there is a market of families out there who want that. We are working with them right now, so that these things are planned accordingly, and that they are taking baby steps, and they are not biting off more than they can chew, so to speak. We don't want people to feel that this is a risky proposition, and it doesn't need to be.

Really, I think that leadership in this field is really what is going to resonate with the public, and it really is something that funeral homes and cemeteries can take advantage of today.

**Nancy:** Are there any concerns that you have about green burial?

**Joe:** Well, I do. I think that there is already green-washing starting in this field. There is a vault company that wants to let people think that vaults are green because they are made from the basic elements of earth. Well, so is plutonium, but let's look at the embodied energy. The public is not going to buy that, and I think it does damage to us when we hear things, or people peddling green caskets that are made from known toxic chemicals, or we have seen it on the cemetery side, many misrepresentations being made.

So, this concerns me, although I think in the end when you do have these mishaps, it is only going to bring people to want to embrace standards that can be certified. I think that we are starting to see some people get involved for the wrong reason, often out of fear, that their

competitor is doing this and they are getting dragged into this. That is not a good way to get involved with green burial. I think they need to really wait until they feel comfortable doing this.

I am concerned that the environmental and conservation community, which I think can really drive demand for this, and create burial grounds. There is a lot of potential to create partnerships among the funeral service industry and land trust and park service agencies.

They are just not going to want to work with cemeteries and funeral homes and cremation companies, if they don't feel there is a way for them to understand what they are getting into, and manage this process. So, I do have some concerns that we have had a few mishaps that need to be nipped in the bud.

**Nancy:** Well, and it brings us back to the trust provider, and when your counselor ABC, certifies funeral homes, certifies cemeteries, and people have more of a comfort level, and they know that things are going to be done according to the way they should be.

**Joe:** That's right. If there is a funeral home out there, they know that we've at least looked at their GPL to know that these offerings are there, and our requirements aren't going to change, or that the funeral home understands how to do non-toxic or potentially non-evasive body prep. If there is a cemetery that is in our network making an aesthetic or ecological promise, there is some way of backing up this promise and constraining future owners. If there is a product manufacturer making promises, the counsel has seen the material safety data sheet, and we know what it is in that product, or if there claims about where it is manufactured or what ingredients are there, we can vouch for that.

So, yeah. I think that this is going to be more and more important to both consumers or to the industry, but I don't think we're there yet right now. I don't think we quite understand why it is important.

**Nancy:** Right, but it is the same reason we have a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval and Consumer Reports, and all of the other regulatory agencies, it is basically to keep people safe.

**Joe:** That's right.

**Nancy:** So, people know what they are buying, and they can be educated consumers, and they know what they are getting into. They know that what they buy is going to be green friendly, and it is not going to be some misrepresentation of a traditional casket or vault company.

**Joe:** That's right.

**Nancy:** Now, Joe, what excites you most about green burials?

**Joe:** I am really pleased that we now have 400 approved providers operating throughout North America, who are willing to step up and serve families. Especially, given how invasive this idea is, and the fact that the market is not so fully emerged. I am really excited that so many people in the field of funeral services have stepped forward to teach one another about how to serve these families. This concept is evolving, and we are learning things. I can't tell you about how many funeral directors or cemeterians have been willing to answer questions when they have a colleague from another state, sometimes within the same market, ask about, "How am I really

supposed to use dry ice? I got a call for a home funeral here. What kind of excavation techniques do I need to know?"

We're of course, trying to facilitate this open source network, but it really requires buy-in, and I've been really pleased to see that we have gotten that. I am really pleased that we are starting to see the potential for this very innovative market-based conservation tool, because there are so many land trusts and park service agencies willing to get involved with this idea. We didn't know that was going to be the case a couple of years ago.

I am really pleased that consumers, who too often have been robbed of their rights, realize that there are many decent people in the field of funeral service do whatever it takes to help them honor the dead and heal the living, and invite in the divine.

**Nancy:** Well, Joe, I was certainly a believer in green burials before we had this interview, but now I am 100% there. I rally the information that you have shared with me and our listeners.

**Joe:** Well, I appreciate the time and the opportunity to again, get the word out, and I look forward to continuing the conversation. Thanks so much, Nancy.

**Nancy:** Oh, thank you, Joe. It has been an honor speaking with you today.