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DIRT AFTER DEATH

Human Composting Offers a Green New Way to Die

Like cremation but in a box of dirt, the new process could soon be legal in Washington.

By [Allison Williams](#) • 2/7/2019 at 12:00pm • Published in the [March 2019](#) issue of *Seattle Met*

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Potential layout of future Recompose facility in Seattle.

IMAGE: [COURTESY MOLT STUDIOS](#)

What happens after death is changing. Not what happens to “the soul” or consciousness, but to our bodies. Forget embalming. Never mind cremation. Washington may soon be the first place in the U.S. where family members can compost loved ones. The deceased become dirt, first placed in a bed of wood chips, alfalfa, and straw, then joining other vessels in a “hive” of stacked hexagonal capsules for four weeks.

Katrina Spade calls that process *recomposition*. In 2014 she launched a company, now known as Recompose—spun from her architecture grad school thesis—that evangelizes converting human remains into soil. But she didn’t exactly invent the idea. Farmers have composted deceased livestock for decades: Cover the dead with straw in a place warm enough to accelerate decomposition, says Spade, and “nature’s doing the work.”

So why, then, aren’t any of our dearly departed currently disintegrating into fecund organic matter? Composting human bodies is illegal in Washington. A bill before the state senate this legislative session could change that—and our entire post-death landscape.

Neither embalm-and-bury nor cremation (all that fossil fuel!) is particularly environmentally friendly. “Cremation is not the green option we all sort of think of it as,” Spade says, estimating that 95 percent of Seattle residents choose it as a preference. And embalming? The practice was popularized when nineteenth century soldiers were preserved to be slowly shipped back home after death. The greenest option right now is natural burial, says Spade, “how we did things before the Civil War”—aka placing the unembalmed corpse a few feet underground. But these days a simple earthen grave takes up more real estate than is practical.

That prompted her to give new life to the old technique of composting. With the help of Washington State University soil scientist Dr. Lynne Carpenter-Boggs and a six-person human trial last summer, Spade developed a version that totally breaks down a body in about a month, leaving only rich, fluffy soil. (Family members can take the whole thing—more than a cubic yard of dirt—or a symbolic small box of it, and scatter it like cremated remains.) The kicker: Recompose estimates it saves a metric ton of carbon emissions compared to either cremation or burial.

State Senate Bill 5001 proposes to sanction recomposition—“contained, accelerated conversion of human remains to soil”—alongside cremation. It would also legalize alkaline hydrolysis, a process similar to cremation but done with fluids, already legal in a handful of other states.

State senator Jamie Pedersen, who introduced the bill, notes that an unconventional, green burial method is perfect here, in a state that loves environmentalism and isn’t very religiously affiliated. He calls more post-death options “a social and economic justice issue,” too. With a four-figure price tag, recomposition won’t be quite as cheap as cremation (which can cost less than \$1,000). But it will be less than most embalmed burials, which sometimes top \$50,000.

Reinventing the afterlife is the Washington way. The state has the highest cremation rate in the country—78.2 percent as measured by the Cremation Association of North America—and was the first place the technique caught on when Seattle’s deathly co-op, the People’s Memorial Association, popularized it back in the 1940s.

Pedersen garnered 10 cosponsors for the bill and has encountered a range of reactions around the senate. “There’s the whole natural human continuum of people who are very matter-of-fact about ‘everyone’s gonna

die,' to people who are completely creeped out," he says. The end result though, he thinks, is key: "People are going to be really excited about being able to turn into soil that will help a tree grow."

Who'd argue with these new methods? The church, for one. The Washington State Catholic Conference opposes alkaline hydrolysis, and spoke out against an earlier bill in 2017.

And the funeral sector isn't exactly a hotbed of quick pivots. "Change is glacial in this industry and it's tied to money," says Seattle funeral director Jeff Jorgenson, who describes his own Elemental Cremation and Burial as progressive. Jim Letson, owner of Beck's Tribute Center in Edmonds and a four-decade vet of the funeral industry, doesn't object to more choice, but notes that significant investment is required to offer new methods. Plus, he says, "We offer green products"—like biodegradable caskets—"but it's not requested very frequently."

If the law changes, Spade wants to build a warehouse space for Recompose in Seattle with that hive of recomposition vessels lining the walls. The architect in her sees a public space where death is openly discussed and not so scary.

She even sees musical concerts happening inside Recompose while dirt silently does its work nearby. It's a beautiful thing, she says. "There's a point in the process where we cease to be human, where our molecules become soil. I find great comfort in that concept."

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